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### (B) Description of Module

| <b>Items</b>                    | <b>Description of Module</b>   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Subject Name                    | Women's Studies  |
| Paper Name                      | Women and History  |
| Module Name/ Title, description | <b>Women and the Bhakti Movement</b> , women Bhaktas, Akka mahadevi, Lal Ded, Meerabai, Bahina Bai their life and Bhakti                     |
| Module ID                       | Paper-3, Module-9  |
| Pre-requisites                  | The reader is expected to have a knowledge about the religious movement in medieval India and its contribution to society                    |
| Objectives                      | To analyse the lives of women under Bhakti<br>What were their attitude towards Bhakti<br>How did Bhakti help them find an alternative space. |
| Keywords                        | Bhakti, movement, devotion, pativrata, female religiosity, pilgrimage, Guru, Abhang  |

### **Women and the Bhakti Movement**

**Rekha Pande**

Most of the traditional sources available for writing about the past are very elitist and male biased and marginalized sections and women's voices are totally absent from these. Hence if we are to search for the historical figures of the women bhaktas we will hit a wall. There is very little information on them. This was mostly an oral tradition. None of these women have

been patronized by any court biographers, nor is any religious hagiography available about them from the time they deemed to have inhabited. Much of their history has been reconstructed much later by writers and biographers arising from the emergent middle class and over the period of time there have been many interpolations also. Yet many of these bhaktas go much beyond the shadowy realms of the past and are very much alive today in popular culture and the day to day life of an average Hindu household. We have to hence turn to the collective memories and remembrances which are based on their bhajans and poems. It is from these that we can get few glimpses of the lives of these Bhaktas in medieval times.

Most of these women lived during the period from 12th century to 17th centuries. In spite of all the interpolations that may have come over a period of time, a glance at the writings of these women shows us that they fought for what they believed in and actively resisted when their positions were challenged. Likewise, women were producers of important ideas that give us entirely new insights into female religiosity and its distinctiveness in the medieval world. It is the large scale participation of women that gave this movement the character of a mass movement. Religion was the only space available to women in medieval times and through this legitimate space women could define their actions and aspirations and participate in public gatherings, visit pilgrimage places, compose their own songs and through bhakti directly reach God. ( Pande, Rekha, 2010, 67-68). Many women bhaktas sought to escape patriarchy and the demands of domesticity by creating an autonomous space and also not being termed wayward loose by going on long pilgrimages to different holy places. This demonstrates the creative use of tradition as both an element of protest and also to carve out some personal space for themselves. Crushed and confined to difficult domestic situations these women found an alternative possibility in their devotion. Renouncing marriage and life in the world generally, they directed their passions to heavenly consorts ( Kinsley, 1980 ). The Lila of Krishna was one such way of engaging with the heavenly consorts where the Lila would mean creation of the universe and was thus extended to all forms of human activity which were seen as a manifestation of divine play as authored in a book by the same name.( Kinsley, 1980). For the women Bhakti became an outlet. A glance at the writings of these women Bhaktas show that they negotiated patriarchy through Bhakti which provided a space for them. Most of these women were socialized into a certain culture which was mostly a closed, patriarchal culture, but through this movement a certain space was created for their freedom and mobility.

Akka Mahadevi was a contemporary of Basavanna, the founder of Virsaiva movement. She was the daughter of a rich merchant in the village of Udutal. She was a great devotee of Siva and initiated into worship at a very early age by an unknown Guru. She grew up into a beautiful young woman and the chieftain of the land named Kausika fell in love with her. Kausiki was an unbeliever and Mahadevi Akka was forced to marry him much against her wishes. Most probably he used coercion and a show of authority to subjugate Akka Mahadevi. Legend goes that she told him that she would leave him if he touched her thrice against her wishes and when he does so she leaves him (Ramanujan, 1985,112). When she leaves him she breaks all the marital relations as well as all the taboos and walks about naked and finally finds solace in the company of saints. It was these saints who ultimately helped her consummate her love for Siva by arranging a real marriage to him. This was a marriage of her choice. She died in her early twenties becoming one with Siva at Srisaila. (Ramanujan, 1985,114). Akka is one of the best known poets of Karnataka. The number of her vachanas which can be culled from various sources is approximately 350. Besides these vachanas some songs and two works titled, The vachanas of creationö and Yogangatri are in her name ( Dabbe, Manushi, 1989, 42).

Lal Ded lived during the fourteenth centuries in Kashmir. She was born in a Brahmin family and was educated at home in her fathers house. She was married at the age of twelve into another Brahmin family surnamed Nica Bhatt at Pimpore. According to the Kashmiri custom she was renamed Padmavati. We have a number of legends which talk about the cruelty meted out to Lal Ded . She endured this torture for twelve years and finally left home. Again it was Bhakti which provided her a space to renounce her domestic hell. Padmavati is supposed to have danced naked singing in frenzy. She now came to be known as Lal Ded, Lal in Kashmiri referring to the lower part of her belly, which increased in size and hung loose over her pubic region.

Mira bai lived during the end of fifteenth and beginning of sixteenth century. She belonged to the Rajput aristocracy of Rajasthan. She was the daughter of RatanSingh and his wife, Vir Kunwari of Medtiya of Rathor clan. Mira's paternal grandfather Jodhaji was the founder of Jodhapur. Her paternal grandfather, Dudaji had conquered Medata city and 360 villages around it. He gave Miras father Ratansing 12 villages of which the central village was Kudki. Mira was born in this fort. Mira's paternal family were Vaishnavas and hence Mira inherited Vaisnava Bhakti as part of her family legacy .

Tradition has it that as a young girl Mira pestered her mother to tell her who was her bridegroom when she saw a marriage procession. To avoid her persistent questioning Mira's mother pointed at a statue of Krishna and told her this was her bridegroom. Mira hence considered herself wedded to Krishna. When she grew up she was married into the royal family of Sisodia Rajputs of Mewar. The identity of her husband is not well established. Some identify him to be maharaj Kumbh and others with Bhojraj the son of the famous Rana Sanga. Most probably the marriage was a part of the political alliance between Rators of Jodhpur with the Ranas of Mewar. Here as elsewhere in Rajasthan, the structure of the *Kul* and the *Bhaiyad* (brotherhood) were closely linked to the system of political power and sovereignty. The kul included all those related to a common ancestor by ties of male blood. The Bhaiyad was composed of the sons and brothers of the rulers who held power over land conquered by them. ( Mukta, 1994, 59). Legend has it that when Mira arrived in her inlaws house she was asked to worship goddess Shakti for the well being of her husband and his family and she refused. Naturally her husband and inlaws were very angry. Mira even refused to consummate her marriage regarding her self already wedded to Krishna. This was an open defiance and her inlaws could not tolerate this. There were various attempts at her life and finally she left the palace and started staying independently in a temple in the palace compound, but here too she did not find solace because of the disapproval of her Bhakti. She then started wandering around in the company of other saints and visited many temples and palaces associated with Krishna. She went to Dakur, then Vrindawan and finally Dwarka. According to legend Akbar and Tansen traveled to Dwarka to visit her and Tansen sang one of her Bhajans.

Tradition has it that when she was staying at the Ranchhorji temple on the sea coast of Dwarka, her natal and marital families sent a group of priests as emissaries to persuade her to return. When she refused the Brahmin priests started a fast unto death outside the temple. Mira was now in a dilemma and did not want to have Brahmin blood on her hand. She then composed, *Hari tum haro jan ke pir* and entered the temple and is said to have absorbed in the statue of Krishna. This is interpreted by many scholars as emerging from the western door of the temple which faces the sea and having leapt into it ( Kishwar, Manushi, 1989, 85). Mira's Bhakti becomes an escape from the hatred and domination which underlay the Rajput system of marriage. It enunciated the principle of love in an age and a society which was marked by war, vendetta and the rising power of the state.



Gangasati was a devoted Rajput woman married to Kahlubha, who shared her love for *bhajan* and *satsang*. Kahlubha according to legend was asked by his fellow Rajputs to prove his faith by bringing a dead cow back to life. He started chanting and singing invoking God to perform a miracle. The cow did come back to life but after this he decided to take *mahasamadhi* and renounce his life for he felt that he would not be allowed to practice Bhakti for its own sake but would become a miracle man. Ganga sati also wanted to join him but he prevented her saying that she had not passed on her knowledge and wisdom to their daughter in law Panbai. Gangasati composed a set of bhajans for this purpose and this is the only recorded case of a woman who is respected for her knowledge passing it on in a formal way to another.

Sant Toral is the better half of the famous Jesal Toral pair that were known as the legendary lover as well as the saint pair. Toral was a Kanthi woman married to Sansatia, who were considered a lower caste than Rajputs but were also martial. Jesal was a Rajput dacoit from Kutch who was dared to acquire Toral. According to legend he was dared to acquire Tati, Toli and Toral, Tati was the famous sword, Toli the famous mare and Toral the woman known for her beauty and piety. Jesal reached Sansatia's house and hid in the stable. When Toral distributed Prasad one extra helping was left and the search revealed Jesal who told Sansatia why he was there. Sansatia willingly gave his wife and mare. According to legend Toral agreed to go because she was born with the mission of changing the lives of three fallen men. But a wife was considered a chattel by the patriarchal system and she could easily be given away.

On their way to Kutch by boat a heavy storm arose and began to rock the boat. While Jesal was terrified of death Toral remained calm and she addressed him in bhajans which teach that the attachment to the material world is pointless and one must find Bhakti. Jesal confesses to his sins which include robbing the wedding processions, killing bridegrooms, stealing and dragging away grazing cows, hunting deers, killing peacocks and letting down his sisters and their children. As he confesses the storm subsides and the boat stops rocking. Anecdotes relate how Jesal is transformed and he gives up arms and violence.

Loyal was born in a community of blacksmiths in the latter half of eighteenth century and is said to have been very beautiful. Her lover Lakha was an ahir a cowherd of Saurashtra and they could not marry due to the difference in their castes. It is believed that Lakha planned to overcome this hurdle by pleasing his family and community by giving many gifts through his

robberies. Loyal became a devotee under the influence of guru Selansi who belonged to the revered sect of Pir Ramdeo. Lakha could not stand the change in Loyal and he tried to attack her and grab her but he was struck with leprosy. Loyal is supposed to have sung 144 *bhajans* to Lakha, talking about the emptiness of life, greatness of guru and the fruits of Bhakti. Her bhajans usually begin with " Ji re Lakhaí ." ( Shukla, 1989, 71)

Mukata Bai of Maharashtra lived during the thirteenth century and was the sister of Nivrutti, Jnanadev and Sopan who are considered the founders of the Varkari tradition. Their father was a Brahmin and a disciple of Ramanand but he was ostracised by the Brahmin community because after having taken sanyas he reverted back to a householders life. He then committed suicide. Though Mukata Bai according to tradition was a beautiful and intelligent girl she did not marry but lived with her brothers. She is said to have composed over 100 abhangs . She died at the young age of eighteen.

Janabai was a contemporary of Muktabai and was a maid servant in the house of Janadev. Not much is known about her except her life as depicted in the abhangs. She talks about her day to day work and how she is helped in this by her God.

The next important saint from Maharashtra was Bahina Bai. She lived during the seventh century and is the only woman saint who has written an autobiography. She was born in a poor Brahmin family of Deigoan. When she was three years old she was married to Ratnakar Pathak who was thirty years old and was a priest and an astrologer. For him this was a second marriage. At the age of seven Bahina Bai came to Kolhapur to live with her husband and his parents. Here too she had to suffer a lot due to her Bhakti and she is the only woman saint who remains married through out her life. Her life eases only when her husband gets converted to her way of thinking. She also wrote her *abhangas* in the popular Marathi ovi meter, which is used in songs when women go about their daily work like doing the household chores, grinding the corn or husking the grain.

A common theme which runs through out the lives of these women is the restricted spaces in their married homes. Suddenly after marriage they do not have any freedom and come into conflict with their in laws family when they want to lead a life according to their wishes. There are attempts at trying to imprison them, lock them and even poison them. Mahadevi Akka says,

*" I have Maya for mother in law*

*The world for father in law*

*Three brothers in law, like tigers.*

*And the husbands thoughts*

*Are full of laughing women.*

*No God this man.*

*And I cannot cross this sister in law*

*But I will*

*Give this wench the slip*

*And go cuckold my husband with hara my lord*

*My mind is my maid .*

*By her kindness I join my lord*

*My utterly beautiful lord*

*From the mountain peaks*

*My lord, .white as Jasmine*

*And / will make him my good husband ( Ramanujan, 1985, 141).*

According to Hindu tradition a husband is supposed to be God and irrespective of all his shortcomings a woman is expected to worship him. The sources for the reconstruction of medieval India maybe be grouped into different genres and literature and epigraphy are among the many sources. While epigraphy is primarily concerned with land and the sale and gift of lands, we have different genres of literature like heroic, court etc. All of them have one dominant strand and object of enquiry that can be comprehended through direct readings as they are for legalistic purposes where the contractual nature of the objects like land, war, court procedures etc make them clear and represent facts. Here this genre of bhakti literature makes elaborate use of established myths and represents them in a counterfactual way so as to subvert the existing meanings which also reflect the yearning for a new order. The above mentioned poem of Akka Mahadevi and the later poems following tem also have a similar theme and reflect this structure.

Even Lal Ded had a very difficult married life. Many legends talk about the cruel treatment meted out to her by her mother in law. Here she was scolded on the slightest pretext. She was not allowed to spin yarn on the spinning wheel, though legend has it that she spun yarn as fine as the lotus stalk. - She was often ridiculed for not doing anything right and often taunted as to what she had learnt at her fathers house. We have among her sayings,

*They may kill a big sheep or a tender lamb,*

*Lalla will have her lump of stone all right ( Parimoo, 1978, 10)*

She was harassed at her in-laws place, and most probably this was due to her not following the wishes of her in laws family blindly. Another- saying attributed to her states,

*I did not give birth to a child nor lay in confinement ( Kaul, 1973, 11).*

Since she did not behave in the expected manner, she was tortured. She was served stones in her food and also accused of infidelity to her husband. She however accepts this because,

*One has to bear lightning, flashes and thunderbolts*

*One has to put up with pitch darkness at midday( Kaul,1973,13)*

Mira's life is better known when compared to the other women Bhaktas. When she got married and came to her in laws family she was accused of not behaving properly like that of a royal woman.

*I have lost the honour of the royal fami/y*

*People say I have gone astray with the sadhus*

*I constantly rise up.*

*go to Gods temple and dance*

*Snapping my fingers*

*I don 't follow the norms*

*As an oldest daughter in law*

*J have thrown away the veil( Chaturvedi, 1983, 244)*

Her family tries to restrict her movements and they even lock her in.

*O friend cannot live 'without the delight giver*

*Mother in law fights, my sister in law teases*

*The Rana remains angry*

*They have a watchman sitting at the door*

*And a lock fastened on it*

*Why should I give up my first love'*

*My only love*

*Mira 's God is the lifter of mountains*

*O nothing else pleases me. ( Chaturvedi, 1983, 42)*

When things get out of hand there is an attempt at her life, because she has brought nothing but disgrace to the Rajput family in which she is wed.

*Friends I am completely dyed in this Krishna colour*

*I drank the cup of immortal bliss*

*My inebriation never goes away*

*However many millions of ways I try*

*Rana sent me a basket with a snake in it*

*And Meera put it around her neck*

*Smiling, Mira hugged it, as if it were a*

*String of new pearls.*

*Rana took a cup of poison, "Find Mira(he said)*

*Give it to her*

*She drank it like charnamrita*

*Singing the praise of Govinda*



*I drank the cup of his name nothing else pleases me now.* ( Chaturvedi, 1983, 40)

Further she states,

*Meera danced with ankle bells on her feet*

*People said Meera was mad*

*My mother in law said, I had ruined*

*the family reputation*

*Rana sent me a cup of poison and*

*Mira drank it laughing.* (Chaturvedi, 1983, 36).

Muktabai lived during the thirteenth century and was the sister of Nivrutti, Jnandev and Sopan who are considered the founders of the Varkari tradition. Their father was a Brahmin and a disciple of Ramanand but he was ostracised by the Brahmin community because after having taken sanyas he reverted back to a householders life. He then committed suicide. Though Mukata Bai according to tradition was a beautiful and intelligent girl she did not marry but lived with her brothers. She is said to have composed over 100 abhangs .

Unlike many other women bhaktas Muktabai does not emphasize her womanhood or talk about the conditions of her life as a woman. Her many songs are cast in the form of dialogues with other sants and she discourses with them as an equal. In *Nivrutti Mukti Samvad*, she and Nivrutti instruct one another. In *Tatiche Abhang* ( Song of the Door) she tries to persuade Jnaneshwar, who has got annoyed by peoples comments and locked himself in his hut, to open the door. She adapts the tone not of a younger sister pleading with the younger brother but a saint addressing another.

She died at the young age of eighteen. In a verse Chokhamela says that if he has a son the son should be a sant and if a daughter she should be like Mirabai or Muktabai, other wise he would rather not have children at all. She is one of the most revered saints of Maharashtra.

Janabai was a contemporary of Muktabai and was a maid servant in the house of Janadev. Janabai was the daughter of a sudra bhakta and was taken into the house of Namdev's father

Damshetti when she was very young and she grew up there as a maid servant. Not much is known about her except her life as depicted in the abhangs. Namdev had taken a vow to compose one crore verses in praise of Vithoba and he divided the task amongst his household members. Janabai also composed a number of abhangs and these appear in *Namdev Gatha*. She is very much aware of her position as a maid servant but she is happy that she is in the house of a sant.

Bahina bai writes in her auto biography,

I was now eleven years of age but I had not had one moments of joy ( Abbot, 1929,)

Again she states,

*I had no independence and my wishes had no effect. I was very depressed in spirits. My daily life was full of troubles.* (Abbot, 1929)

She recognizes her limitations as a woman.

*Possessing a woman's body and myself being subject to others, I was not able to carry out my desire to discard all worldly things.* (Abbot, 1929)

For Bihnas husband this was his second marriage. At the age of seven Bihna Bai left her birthplace and came to Kolhapur along with her husband and parents.

When Bihna was ten years old her parents received a cow and calf as alms and she became very attached to the calf.

*If the calf was not at sight, I was troubled. I felt like a fish out of water. Whether I was grinding or pounding grain, or carrying water, I was unhappy, though with others, without the calf. I was the only one to feed it with grass and with out me it was unhappy* ( Abbot, 1929, 16)

When Bihna bai and her parents went to attend a Kirtan of a well known sant, Jiyaram Swami, she took her calf along with her and when people objected to the calf being in the crowded room, it was driven out. The calf stood outside and cried and Bihna sobbed inside the room. Jiyaram Swami, then had the calf brought inside and blessed both of them. Ratnakar Pathak was very angry when he got to hear about this incident. He seized her by

her hair and beat her to his hearts content. ( Abbot, 1929, 13). Her feet and hand were tied. The calf refused to eat food and died twelve days later. This shocked Bahina and she became unconscious for three days and wished, I would also accompany the life of my calf( Abbot, 1929, 8).

In this unconscious state in her dreams she saw Vithoba and accepted Tukaram as her Guru. Naturally her husband did not like this, because Tukaram came from the lower caste and they were Brahmins and custom and scriptures forbade any contact with the lower castes.

My husband began to say vile are Brahmins. We should spend our time in the study of

, the Vedas. What is all this? The shudra Tuka, seeing him in dreams. My wife is ruined by all this. ( Her husband also gave her bodily suffering on account of this ( Abbot, 1929, 3)

Ratnakar Pathak now started contemplating of leaving his wife,

Who cares for the feeling of bhakti. I will abandon her and go into the forest, for people are going to bow down to her, while she regards me worthless as a straw.

Who will show respect to me in her presence. ( Abbot, 1929, 3,4, 5).

In some of her abhangas she comes across as a rebellious and bold person and her refusal to abandon her Bhakti and her search for truth.

*The Vedas cry aloud, the puranas shout*

*No good comes to woman*

*I was born with a woman's body*

*How am I to attain the truth?*

*They are foolish, seductive, and deceptive-*

*Any connections with a woman is disastrous*

*Bahina says, " If a woman's body is so harmful,*

*How in this world will I reach the truth?*

Hence the common thread that runs through the lives of all these women is the treatment meted out to them in their inlaws house at the hands of husbands, inlaws or sister-in-laws. Now it is Bhakti which provides them a space and to move out of this house and in the process they get their independence. For all these women bhaktas the rejection of the power of the male figure whom they were tied to in subordinate relationship became the terrain for struggle, self assertion and alternative seeking (Manushi, 1989) The above can also be read as the mainstream religions having an emotional vacuum since these challenge the way that the emancipator nature of religion is absent in ritual, text and practice, therefore the emotional content is to be a compensation in the ecstatic raptures. Therefore these poems address a new sensorial or the senses

But now bhakt offers a choice and Mahadevi has the courage to state that this husband of hers is no God and she would make her Lord God as a good husband. She also talks about the constant conflict between her duties at home and her Bhakti.

*Husband inside*

*Lover outside*

*I can't manage them both*

*This world and the other*

*I can't manage them both.*

*O Lord white as Jasmine*

*I cannot hold in one hand*

*Both the round nut*

*And the long bow (Ramanujan, 1985,127).*

The first and the foremost thing which many of these women do is to cast off all notions of decency and modesty which are the lynchpin of the patriarchal society, which neatly divides

the respectable family women from the other women, who is not respectable. Akka mahadevi sheds her clothes and walks naked.

*Brother you have come*

*drawn by the beauty*

*of these billowing breasts, this brimming youth*

*I am no woman brother no whore ( Susan Daniel, 1991, 80).*

Janabai states,

*Let me not be sad because I am born a woman*

*In this world many saints suffer in this way She further states,*

*Cast off all shame*

*And sell yourself*

*In the market place*

*Then alone*

*You can hope to reach the Lord ( Vilas Sarang, 1991,83)*

Mira also states,

*O my companion there is nothing to be ashamed of now*

*Since I have been seen dancing openly*

*In the day I have no hunger*

*At night I am restless and cannot sleep*

*Leaving these troubles behind I go to the other side( Keay, 1991, 93)*



Akka has a total disdain for the earthly husband, much in contrast to what she has been taught by scriptures and told by tradition because the earthly husband decays and dies.

*I love this handsome one*

*He has no death*

*Decay or form*

*No place or side*

*No end nor birthmark*

*I love him O mother listen*

*So the lord white as jasmine is my husband*

*Take these husbands who die*

*And decay and feed them*

*To your kitchen fires( Ramanujan, 1985,134)*

Mira comes out in open defiance.

*If Sisodiya is angry, what will he do to me.*

*I will sing the virtues of Govind my friend*

*If Rana is angry, he will stay in his own country*

*If Hari is angry I will wither friend.*

*I dont care for worldly position( Chaturvedi, 1983,35).*

Mira has no faith in the worldly marriage and prefers being wed to her Hari.

*Friends marriage of this world are false*

*They are wiped out of existence*

*Wed my indestructible one*

*The serpent death cannot devour*( Chaturvedi, 1983,194).

Soon Meera became free of her worldly burdens when her husband died. Now she openly started associating with like-minded people who were involved with bhakti. Her family did not like this, because Meera was breaking tradition and moving out of purdha and by talking and associating with other males, she was bringing shame to the family.

*I have found a guru in Raidas*

*He has given me the pill of knowledge*

A women is seen by nature( *sva Bhav*) as not only pollutant but also potentially dangerous because of her sexuality. Therefore in the family her sexuality should always be controlled and she should be subservient to the male authority. Her sexuality is seen as a source of prosperity when it is active but it has to be controlled by her husband in any other situation and she must totally repress it.

Akka Mahadevi now risen above the body and has no need for any jewels and clothes, which in her earlier life were a very important parameter of her status Vis, a vi her husband.

*You can confiscate*

*Money in hand*

*Can you confiscate?*

*The body's glory*

*To this shameless girl*

*Where is the need for cover and jewels.* ( Ramanujan, 1985, 129)

She now has no other ambition except to join her lord.

*O Shiva*

*When shall!*

*Crush you on my pitcher breasts*

*O lord white as jasmine*

*When do I join you*

*Stripped of body's shame*

*And my hearts modesty.*

She looks upon all men except her lover Shiva as her brothers and dissuades them from coming near proclaiming that she is neither a woman nor a whore.

*You have come seeing the beauty*

*Of rounded breasts and the*

*Fullness of youth brother*

*Brother I am not a woman*

*Brother I am not a whore*

*Brothers seeing me again and again*

*For whom have you come?*

*Look brother any man*

*Other than the Lord who is white as Jasmine*

*Is a face I cannot stand ( Zydenbos, 1989).*

She shows a lot of firmness and courage in her wanderings all alone by herself. There

is a hint of being harassed but she remains pure for her lover.

*Do not worry*

*That I am completely alone*

*What ever they do I will not be aji-aid*

*J will eat dried leaves*

*J will sleep on a sword*

*O lord white as jasmine*

*If you want to examine me*

*I will offer my body and soul to you*

*And be pure. ( Zydenbos, 198, 42)*

It is not that the path of Bhakti is easy. There are lots of dilemmas and struggles. Akka Mahadevi states,

*The stream behind the river in front*

*Tell me which way to go*

*The pond behind the net in front*

*Tell me where safety is (Zydenbos, 198, 42)*

However these moments of dilemma and confusion are very few in comparison to her pain and sufferings

*My restless mind has been turned upside down*

*The whirling wind has become*

*Scorching*

*The moonlight has become the heat*

For Meera too the pains of home become easy

Finally she leaves her home and goes out in search of her real home. There is nothing which can now make her turn back.

*Rana to me your slander is sweet*

*Some praise me, some blame me, I go the other way*

*On the narrow path, I found God's people*

*What should I turn back for? ( Chaturvedi, 240)*

In her wanderings Meera had to face harassment and disapproval. She has a number of songs which talk about people of the world laughing at her, thinking her mad blaming her, even regarding her a destroyer of families.<sup>42</sup> Meera however just ignore these and she is said to have travelled to Dakaur, Vrindavan and Dwarka all place associated with Krishna. Her lover Krishna now becomes the centre of existence.

*I go to Giridhar's house*

*Giridhar is my real lover*

*I see his beauty and am allured*

*When nightfall's, I go and when day breaks I come back*

*Night and day I play with him and*

*Please him in every way ( Tirpathi, 1979, 83).*

There is a restlessness in her for her beloved.



*Friend the dark ones glance is like love's dagger*

*It stuck me and*

*I grew restless*

*I lost all sense of my body*

*Pain spreads through my body*

*My mind is intoxicated*

*I have found few friends*

*All of them are mad... ....*

*The chakor loves the moon, the moth by the lamp is burnt*

*The fish dies without 'water'- dear indeed is such love*

*How can I live without seeing him. My heart is not at rest. ( Manushi, 1989, 89)*

Bahina's husband also started thinking of leaving her due to her involvement in Bhakti. But then it is discovered that Bahina was three months pregnant and so her husband could not abandon her. Meanwhile Bahina also decided that it was her duty to serve her husband first rather than Vithal or Tukaram, because if her husband left her she would be ruined completely. However, soon her husband became seriously ill and Bahina nursed him very devotedly. He regarded his illness as a punishment for having insulted Vithal and Tukaram. So after he recovered he realized his mistake and came around to Bihnabai's path and they moved to Dehu where Tukaram lived and accepted him as their guru. It was only after her husband came around to her path of bhakti did Bahina's life become easy.

Hence, to conclude, even a cursory reading of the Bhakti literature shows us that, it is Bhakti which gives these women the moral courage to stand against patriarchal political authority and create an alternate space for themselves ( Pande, 1991). They defy patriarchal norms of marriage and walk out( except in the case of Bahina bai) which survives even to this day in

folk memory but is delegitimized in main stream history highlighting the fundamental disconnect between history writing and the type of sources used to essay history. In Hinduism devotion of the wife to her husband and her complete merger in him is the highest aim, even if the husband was a fiend. The women in Bhakti found the courage to defy this and either walked out of their houses and the restricted spaces of patriarchal control or changed their husbands to their way of thinking. It is interesting to note that , while the majority of the Bhakti saints especially, Nirgun are very critical of all institutions and revolted against idolatry, tyranny of castes' and creeds along with temples and rituals, in .the change which they sought, women were not included. At this time many of the women saints were leading non-traditional, non-conformist lives and talking of individual freedom. Many of the Bhakti saints, though clamoring for a change and protesting vocally against the prevalent injustice in society, conveniently left but the women, relegating her to the background. She had no place in the change that was being sought. It was a change that was being defined by male parameters. Since the change was being sought within a given structure, it did not attempt at changing the power structure vis a vis the family. The Bhakti saints did not attempt at reorganization of social relationships within the family. There was every attempt at marginalizing the women and pushing them back into the domestic sphere and only that women became an ideal who was an obedient wife, a Pativrata or a Sati-Savitri. At this time the women writing bhakti literature negotiated patriarchy and created an alternative space for them.

## Paper-3 Module-7

### Role of Women in Medieval Politics – Delhi Sultanate, Mughals and Deccan

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#### (B) Description of Module

| Items                           | Description of Module   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Subject Name                    | Women's Studies   |
| Paper Name                      | Women and History   |
| Module Name/ Title, description | <b>Role of Women in Medieval Politics – Delhi Sultanate, Mughals and Deccan.</b>  |
| Module ID                       | <b>Paper-3 Module-7.</b>  |
| Pre-requisites                  | The reader is expected to have some knowledge about Medieval Indian politics, Women in medieval India.  |
| Objectives                      | To explain the importance and space of women in medieval politics. Also to explain the change that came in Indian politics with the advent of Islam. To clear the misconception that medieval India did not allow women to participate in political activity because of Purdah. The women did participate in political activity despite purdah. |
| Keywords                        | Political participation, Purdah, Islam, Mughal, Deccan, Sultanate, warrior women.   |

### Role of Women in Medieval politics – Delhi Sultanate, Mughals and the Deccan

## **Introduction**

India is a male dominated society. Religion, social norms, legal structures, cultural values and mores of the region have, through historical times, encouraged and fostered patriarchy in numerous ways. However, Patriarchy has never been a monolithic or a static institution. It is one of the most dynamic systems across the world, flexible yet persistent. It however does not alter its basic principle of accepted supremacy of men over women. The dynamism of patriarchy also stems from the fact that women are as much central to its preservation as men. The ideology of patriarchy stemming from religious and social acceptance makes women a willing party in subverting the role of women members within a society.

The consciousness regarding the gender imbalance and subversion of women at large has been a recent one, a product of the modern period. In earlier times male superiority and their domination in all aspects of collective and family life was almost uncontested. In this respect the medieval period was no different. Politics or the authority to rule was considered an exclusively male domain. Men in pre-modern India considered it below their dignity to be ruled by women. Indian society contested this prejudice on rare occasions. Women were not completely ousted from political participation. Intelligent and accomplished women tried to influence political decision making from '**behind the veil**'. The medieval period in India was different from earlier times. The introduction of Islam changed the political structure of India in significant ways. It is difficult to state here as to in what way Islam changed women's political participation in Indian society, but one can certainly see an opening up in this respect. There is of course a contradiction here. On the one hand Islam imposed the veiling of women while on the other it allowed for women's participation in political activity seen in the case of Raziya Sultan and Nur Jahan, Maham Anaga, etc. we do not see such open participation or women wielding political influence prior to the introduction of Islam in India.

## **Delhi Sultanate**

The Mamluk dynasty under what is known as the Delhi Sultanate was different from the previous ruling powers of India in several respects. It was the first kingdom to be established in India on Islamic principles, though not *Sharia* driven. It was also a dynasty ruled by freed slave warriors of previous rulers. Thus the ideas of hierarchy on which Indian polities stood so far were shaken to some extent. More importantly, it was also the only dynasty to have raised a woman ruler to the throne, in a male dominated political atmosphere. The appointment of Raziya as Iltutmush's heir and then as ruler was fiercely contested and her reign was cut short as much due to factional politics as due to the fact that she was a woman. Let us now take a detailed look at the case of Raziya Sultan as the first woman king of Delhi.

### **Raziya Sultan**

The foundation of the Mamluk dynasty was laid by Qutb-ud-Aibak but strengthened by Iltutmush. He ruled from 1210-1230. Iltutmush had three sons and one daughter. The eldest son was Nasir-ud-din Mahmud who Iltutmush had nominated as his heir but who died suddenly while he was governing Bengal. His other sons were incapable of shouldering the responsibility of ruling the kingdom and Iltutmush knew this. He thus began considering his daughter Raziya for the role of a king. She was naturally capable and well educated. To test her abilities Iltutmush gave her the charge of administering Delhi when he went on his Gwalior campaign. Raziya discharged her duties efficiently and received laurels from her father. Immediately, Iltutmush declared her his heir and coins with the names of Iltutmush and Raziya were struck to commemorate this event (**Habib & Nizami, 230-231**). However, despite the public proclamation of her succession by the king himself, her accession to the throne was not easy. Immediately after Iltutmush's death, one of his son's Ruknuddin Firuz was raised to the throne by the powerful section of the provincial officers. There is some controversy regarding the late king's last wish with regard to the succession issue. Barani, believes that Ruknuddin and not Raziya was made the heir by Iltutmush on his death bed which was duly followed by his officers most of who were slaves brought and raised by Iltutmush himself (**Habib & Nizami, 232**). However, while reading Barani we must not forget the biases inherent in his account and his dislike for women in politics in general and Raziya as a ruler in particular.



Ruknud din succeeded his father with the help of the *amirs* and his mother. However, he was reckless and his mother too domineering for him to succeed on the throne. His ill treatment of his other brother along with that of some *amirs* led to the rise of rebellions across the kingdom. This was the time when Raziya who enjoyed the support of army and the amirs of Delhi dethroned her brother and declared herself the ruler of Delhi. Ruknud din was put to death barely 7 months after his father's death (**Habib & Nizami, 236,**). According to Mohammad Habib and Khaliq Nizami there were some striking features to Raziya's accession:

1. People took initiative in deciding the ruler. Raziya had complete support of people of Delhi.
2. Her accession was a kind of a contract between the ruler and the people. If she didn't protect or perform they had a right to remove her.
3. The theologians of the time were proved useless and powerless since Raziya was raised to the throne despite their stated opposition to her (**Habib & Nizami, 237**).

Raziya's rule was marked by opposition from every corner. Though she enjoyed the support of the residents of Delhi, the main opposition came from the group of slave officers raised by her father known as *Turkan-i-Chihalgani*. This group was headed by Balban, an important and capable noble who later became the ruler of Delhi. Both Barni and Minhaj-us-Siraj refer to the *Chihalgani* nobles. According to Barni they were forty in number but he gives detailed reference of only 25 members and Balban figures predominantly in his account (**Habib & Nizami, 232**). Minhaj on the other hand refers to nobles far exceeding the said forty (**Habib & Nizami, 234**). The *Chihalgani* nobles were mostly posted in the provinces as **Iqtadars** and aspired for greater power in the post-Iltutmush period. However, under the strong rule of Raziya they had no scope to further their own power. In addition, Raziya began to assert herself as soon as she rose to power. On the one hand she abandoned the traditional *Purdah*, seclusion of women from the public eye. *Purdah*, by its very nature hampered her day to day activities like meeting people and administering her kingdom. Instead she began to wear a **qaba** (cloak) and **kulla** (hat) similar to the male kings of the Sultanate. This was the visible proclamation of Raziya's power which broke no opposition. On the other hand she began raising her own nobility by taking away power and responsibilities from the earlier *Chihalgani* nobles. This act was seen as a threat by the slave nobles and

they started hatching conspiracies against her. Several provincial governors formed groups to overthrow her. She could efficiently curb these rebellions and undertook administrative reorganization. However, she failed to offer a share in power and resources to her father's nobles which ultimately led to her downfall. Despite several alliances with some of these nobles, especially her marriage with the governor Altunia, Raziya was defeated. Both were killed in 1240 marking the end of the glorious career of the only woman king of Delhi Sultanate.

According to Minaj *She was endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for Kings. But her sex was her greatest disqualification.*

However, modern scholars do not agree with this assessment. According to Mohammad Habib and Khaliq Nizami, Raziya's failure lay in the fact that she failed to forge an alliance with the *Chihalgani* who were the most powerful segment of the nobility. Satish Chandra too blames the *Chihalgani* and not her gender for her failure (**Chandra, 50**). The *Chihalgani* was responsible for the turmoil even in post-Raziya times which came to an end under the iron hand of Balban. So far as Raziya is concerned her reign was marked by sound political judgement, grit and courage. She dealt with many rebellions and made necessary alliances but mostly to break the *Chahilgani* nobles and not to share power with them. One of her achievements was that she refused to get drawn into the Mongol conflict which saved her kingdom from loot. She knew her limitations.

### **The Mughals**

The Mughals established the biggest empire of medieval India and their legitimacy was unparalleled in Indian history. Babur laid the foundations of the Empire in 1525-26 by conquering Delhi. The Mughals set long lasting precedents and institutions on Indian soil. Babur's grandson Akbar under whom the Empire grew geographically as well as culturally was the architect of this Empire. Since his regime several changes took place, some good some not so good. The role Women played in the politics of Mughal Empire was also unique in many ways. With regard to this issue we can divide the Mughal era into parts, pre-Akbar and Akbar onwards. Under Akbar the Empire acquired institutional grandeur and certain rigidity in its attitudes. There were several reasons for this which will be discussed later. Prior to Akbar however, the political situation was much more fluid and therefore open, given the fact that both Babur and Humayun spent much of their

time wandering (unsettled life) from place to place and in almost continuous warfare for political and personal survival. This fluidity allowed the women of their times to play important and direct political roles, i.e., of mediating and administering, etc.

### **Babur's Period**

During Babur's times women, especially elder women i.e., mothers, foster mothers and sisters played an important role in politics. In addition to offering advice on important political matters they were also the chief mediators for the king. This was a period when after being ousted from his ancestral kingdom of Farghana Babur's efforts to regain it was defeated time and again by his own kinsmen. His position was in a flux. Incessant warfare with claims and counter claims to sovereignty were the order of the day. While military prowess and resources were very much required during this time, negotiations also played a key part in many situations. All claimants to various kingdoms in Central Asia belonged to the shared genealogy of Chingizi-Timurid lineage (timurid, uzbek, etc). There were also close family ties through marriages between these rival claimants. It was this situation which allowed women to interfere in political matters. Sometimes only women could undertake negotiations and not men.

Gulbadan Begum mentions several such women who Babur considered important for his political survival.

**Isan Dawlat Begum:** Babur's grandmother was known for her *strategy and tactics*. She was in charge of administration and political affairs immediately after Babur's father's death. Babur was around 11 years old then. She spent all her energies in saving Babur's kingdom including dealing with conspiracies against him (**Lal, 135; Mukherjee, 115-116**). She even decided the officers for every post and any shuffling was done with her orders. She related stories of Chengiz Khan and Timur to Babur to boost his morale and as lessons in war strategies. Regarding her Babur says in his memoirs *few among women will have been my grandmother's equal for judgement and counsel; she was very wise and farsighted and most affairs of mine were carried through under her advice* (**Mukherjee, 116**).

His mother **Qutluq Nigar Khanum** too supported him in the same way. She was known for her courage, patience and endurance and had a personal army of around 1500 soldiers (**Mukherjee, 116**). She accompanied Babur to all wars and expeditions. Babur speaks of her bearing great hardships for his sake while he was a wandering king. She died in 1505 without seeing her son a successful king.

**Maham Begum:** She was Babur's favourite wife and became influential during Babur and Humayun's times. She belonged to the Shia sect and helped Babur in cementing political ties with Iran. She also travelled with Babur to Balkh and Badakshan and shared his difficulties (**Mukherjee, 118**). She was given the title *Padshah Begum* by Babur.

**Khanzadeh Begum**, eldest sister of Babur saved him in 1501 by marrying his more powerful rival Shiabani Khan when Babur could not defend himself. Babur was besieged in Samarkand without any help and could only save himself after agreeing to let Shiabani Khan have his sister in return for his own life (**Mukherjee, 117**). This act of Khanzadeh Begum in Mughal sources was considered as a 'Sacrifice' and when she returned to her brother 10 years later in 1511 she was not only received well but also accorded a special position in the Mughal domestic world (**Lal, 224**). Under Humayun she was given a coveted title *Padshah Begum* and was the chief lady of the Harem. She continued to provide political advice to the Emperor and acted as a peace maker and negotiator. One of the important episodes of her intervention was when Mirza Hindal insisted on the *Khutba* being read in his name instead of Humayun's name. The *Khutba* in the medieval state was the symbol of sovereignty. A *Khutba* could be read only in the Emperor's name. Hindal's insistence was an act of rebellion. Humayun sent Khanzadeh Begum to negotiate with Hindal regarding the sovereignty of Humayun and explain to him the threat from Uzbeks and the need for Babur's sons to be united. She played an important part in settling the issue. On several other occasions also she attempted to establish peace and cordiality between Humayun and his warring brothers, Hindal, Kamran and Askari until she died in 1545 (**Mukherjee, 121**).

**Hamideh Banu Begum:** She was the favourite wife of Humayun who accepted the Emperor as her husband only after much insistence on his part (**Lal, 235**). It was she who Gulbadan Begum records as having said: *I shall marry someone, but he will be a man whose collar my hand can touch and not one whose skirt it did*



*not reach*. She became the mother of Akbar therefore rose in status within the Harem. In addition, her political sagacity was such that she was given the charge of the Empire when Humayun was away (**Lal, 235-236**). She also played an important advisory role during Akbar's reign. She was given the title of *Maryam-Makani*. She was also the first lady of the Empire during her lifetime till 1604.

These were some of the women who played important roles during Babur and Humayun's reign helping the early Mughal Emperors survive and hold on to the Empire.

### **Akbar Onwards**

In the earlier section we have seen as to how women played a significant political role in maintaining the kingship of their male counterparts. Since the accession of Akbar this tradition was broken in significant ways. There were several reasons for this break, but mainly three reasons stand out.

1. Akbar's kingdom became a settled domain with specific geographical limits as distinct from Babur's shifting and Humayun's wandering kingdoms.
2. It also came to acquire a definite Indian character shedding much of its central Asian features. Rajputization of the Harem is one major factor in this respect.
3. The family ties too were no more intertwined with the central Asian clans. Only those families that migrated with Babur and Humayun remained within the purview of Mughal domestic relations.

However, these developments did not diminish the importance accorded to the women members of the royal family. In fact, the Mughal Harem now came to be regarded more sacred than earlier and therefore more rigid. It came to be regarded as a matter of pride and a symbol of Mughal sovereignty and was thus lavishly designed and protected (**Lal, 140 onwards**). Such developments if not limited, at least changed the way women functioned politically in the Mughal set up. Women still continued to exert their influence on the Emperors but indirectly. Except perhaps for Nur Jahan no other Mughal women is mentioned as directly influential in Mughal official sources. It is significant that the names of Emperors' mothers too have been omitted in these accounts. Nonetheless, we can glean the political

influence of some accomplished women from behind the curtains as a result of some painstaking work by modern scholars.

**Nur Jahan:** Amongst all Mughal women Nur Jahan was the most remembered and powerful queen. She is believed to have had absolute control over her husband Jahangir who was all but a puppet Emperor. Research has shown this version to be an incorrect one. Jahangir was indeed a powerful Emperor and undertook his kingly duties with precision and dedication similar to his predecessors. However, Nur Jahan was an exceptional woman and her political role went beyond the mundane duties of managing the Harem and advising the King. She was part of what Beni Prasad calls as *The Junta*. It was a clique consisting of four most powerful and close members of the court and royal family viz., Itmad-ud-daula, the prime minister of Jahangir and Nur Jahan's father, her brother Asaf Khan, Nur Jahan herself and Khurram (the future ShahJahan) Jahangir's most capable son. This particular combination made these four members highly influential and powerful in the court circles and except for Khurram the others were from the same family. It is held by Beni Prasad as well as Ellison Findlay that this clique made NurJahan very powerful in the Empire. However, the power of the Junta has been contested by Nurul Hasan who rejects the theory and holds that Jahangir was all powerful during his reign (**Hasan, 342-35**).

NurJahan was an exceptionally accomplished woman. She was well educated, generous and intelligent in finances. She invested in overseas trade through her ships and dealt with Europeans, Portuguese as well as the Dutch. The English too sought her protection and support to obtain trade permissions in Jahangir's court. During Jahangir's reign she enjoyed paraphernalia equal to her husband. She took part in political decision making, struck and circulated coins in her own name and granted public audience on her own (**Sharma, 8-9**). She also had the privilege of issuing *Parvanahs* and *Hukms* generally reserved for royal princes. Her ability as a soldier and a cunning politician is brought to our notice during the incident of Mahabat Khan's rebellion which took place towards the end of Jahangir's reign. Mahabat Khan, a trusted and loyal noble of Jahangir rebelled against him in 1626. He had a personal grudge against Nur Jahan and detested her interference in state matters. This incident happened while Jahangir was camping on the banks of Jhelum. Mahabat Khan imprisoned the Emperor to settle scores against an insult meted out to him by Nur Jahan. While confining the Emperor he sought to induce



Jahangir to come out of Nur Jahan's influence and restore him to his former glory. Through an ill fought battle Nur Jahan surrendered herself to Mahabat Khan so that she could be in close proximity to the Emperor. After her surrender, on her suggestion, Jahangir behaved as if he was convinced of Mahabat Khan's opinion of Nur Jahan and made him believe that Mahabat Khan would hence forward look after the Empire's affairs. Having lulled him into confidence Nur Jahan began buying Mahabat Khan's soldiers one by one and gave secret instructions to her servants to raise an army to counter Mahabat Khan. Once her army was ready she took complete control and Mahabar Khan could only retreat. Though he was not punished severely for this act of travesty of loyalty and obedience by the Emperor he could never again regain his position in Jahangir's court. This episode however highlights the capabilities of Nur Jahan as a leader, a shrewd politician who could strike at the opportune moment and as an organizer who single handedly tackled a major rebellion (**Findlay, 260-274**). There were several other women of the Mughal family who were similarly influential though not as much as Nur Jahan.

**Maham Anagha:** She was the chief wet nurse of Akbar and one of the most influential figures in Akbar's early life. The Mughals had a tradition of engaging wet nurses who took care of the infant prince and they were in complete charge of their upbringing. Thus, these women had great amount of affection and loyalty towards the princes. They safeguarded the princes given into their care at personal peril as in case of Maham Anagha. Akbar had four such nurses. Maham was the main nurse. After Akbar could free himself from the clutches of Bahram Khan she became Akbar's chief advisor and administrator. She was also given the charge of the Mughal Harem. Her fall from grace came when her son Adham Khan betrayed Akbar. He was killed by Akbar and Maham too passed away soon after.

**Mariyam-us-Zamani** was mother to Jahangir and the chief queen of Akbar. She was well known for her commercial enterprises and support to Hajj pilgrimages through her ships. She also built mosques and other public utility buildings.

**Mumtaz Mahal:** The chief queen of Shah Jahan, she was also politically active. She was given the title **Mallika-i-Zaman** and was the in charge of the Harem. The royal seal bearing the Emperor's name, the insignia of the Empire was kept in her custody. The Emperor's orders had to pass through her to get the seal affixed.

Shahjahan consulted her on important state matters. She too had authority to issue *Paravanas* and *Hukums* (Sharma, 9-10; Mukherjee, 147).

**Jahanara:** She was the eldest daughter of Shahjahan and perhaps the last of the illustrious Mughal women. She too was capable and well educated. In addition to the usual talents of the royal family she was a poet as well as a Sufi. She had a soft corner for her elder brother Dara Shikoh, the heir apparent. She played a significant part in the war of succession amongst the sons of Shah Jahan because of her influence with her father. After Mumtaz Mahal died in 1631, Jahanara took complete control of her father's personal affairs. She was also made the in-charge of the Harem. She too invested in overseas trade and enjoyed special privileges like earlier queens. Her importance was diminished to some extent after the accession of Aurangzeb but later she was accorded a special position in the domestic and court life because of her political capabilities.

Her other sister **Roshan Ara** also played a politically important role and was a supporter of Aurangzeb. She was a poet and head of the Harem under Aurangzeb. She died in 1671. Thus several women played an important role in the Mughal domestic and state matters. The fact that in case of the Mughals the domestic environment was part of the court made their intervention easy and effective.

### **Deccan**

The Deccan peninsula had a history of women political participation predating the medieval period. The Shatavahanas witnessed women in politics in the early years of the ancient period. Gautamiputra Shatakarni's mother played a significant part in state politics. In addition to advisory roles she also directly gave land grants in charity to religious institutions on behalf of the state. Thus, the Deccan had a tradition of women in politics. During the medieval period we do find sporadic instances of women rising to power, sometimes directly to rule but mostly indirectly as important influential personalities. We shall see some of these powerful women below.

**Rudrama Devi** was the fourth independent queen of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal. She ruled from 1262 to 1289. Her father Ganapati had no sons and his brothers died before him leaving him no choice but to appoint his daughter as ruler. He ruled jointly with Rudramadevi for some years before he died. Later she

became the sole ruler. Many inscriptions mention her as Rudra and address her as Maharaja i.e., a male king. She also wore male attire similar to Raziya. This can be seen as an attempt to gain acceptance in a male dominated society. Rudrama devi was an able warrior who safeguarded her kingdom from the neighbouring pandyas of Tamil Nadu, Gangas of Orissa and Seunas of Devagiri. She died on a battlefield in 1289. She was succeeded by her daughter's son Prataparudra (**Singh, 553**).

Another interesting personality in medieval Deccan was **Chand Bibi**. She was the princess of Ahmednagar and married Ali Adil Shah I of Bijapur. She was adept in court politics and acted as a regent of the Bijapur Sultanate (1580-90) and of the Ahmednagar Sultanate (1596-99). She played an important part in saving Ahmednagar kingdom from the expanding Mughal forces in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. She negotiated with Mughal Emperor Akbar and his son prince Daniyal. However, she could not outsmart factional politics and the ambitions of powerful nobles like Mian Manjhu and Abhang Khan leading to her death by public lynching on the charges of secret alliance with the enemy, the Mughals. She was a good stateswoman who thwarted many rebellions and a warrior whose presence inspired the army to fight the Mughals. She was also given a popular title Chand Sultan (**223-224, Shyam**).

17<sup>th</sup> century Deccan witnessed rise of the Marathas. The Marathas had many warrior women who fought on behalf of their men folk. Remarkable amongst them was **Uma Bai Dabhade**. She was a warrior and wife of Maratha Senapati Triambak Rao Dabhade in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. She was a fierce warrior who advanced Maratha possessions in Gujarat. After her husband's death in 1731 in the battle between Peshwa and the Senapati she took leadership of his forces. Through her deputy Damaji Gaekwad she could re-conquer lands lost to the Mughals after Triambak Rao's death. She acted as the regent of her son Yashwant Rao who was made Senapati by Peshwa (**Duff, 366-370**).

Medieval Deccan produced many other Maratha women like Jijabai, mother to Shivaji, Tara bai, Ahilya Bai Holkar and others who played political roles as advisors, regents and warriors safeguarding their husband's and son's interests.

## Conclusion

We can see that medieval India predominantly had male rulers across different regions and periods. Women however did not stay away from politics as required by the society in those days but managed to leave their mark in various ways. Fulfilling an advisory role was the most common and respected form of political activity for women. There were also regents who could fight battles and administered kingdoms but never ruled directly as kings or ruling queens. In the medieval Indian psyche political authority was vested only in men. Women were not tolerated. At least their struggle for survival was more intense than their male counter parts. Raziya is a case in point here. Rulers like Raziya and Rudrama Devi adopted male attitudes and attire in order to assert their right to rule. Rudrama Devi has been represented as a male ruler in the inscriptions being addressed as Rudra and Maharaja. So we can say that the society found it difficult to accept women rulers. They were more acceptable in indirect roles.

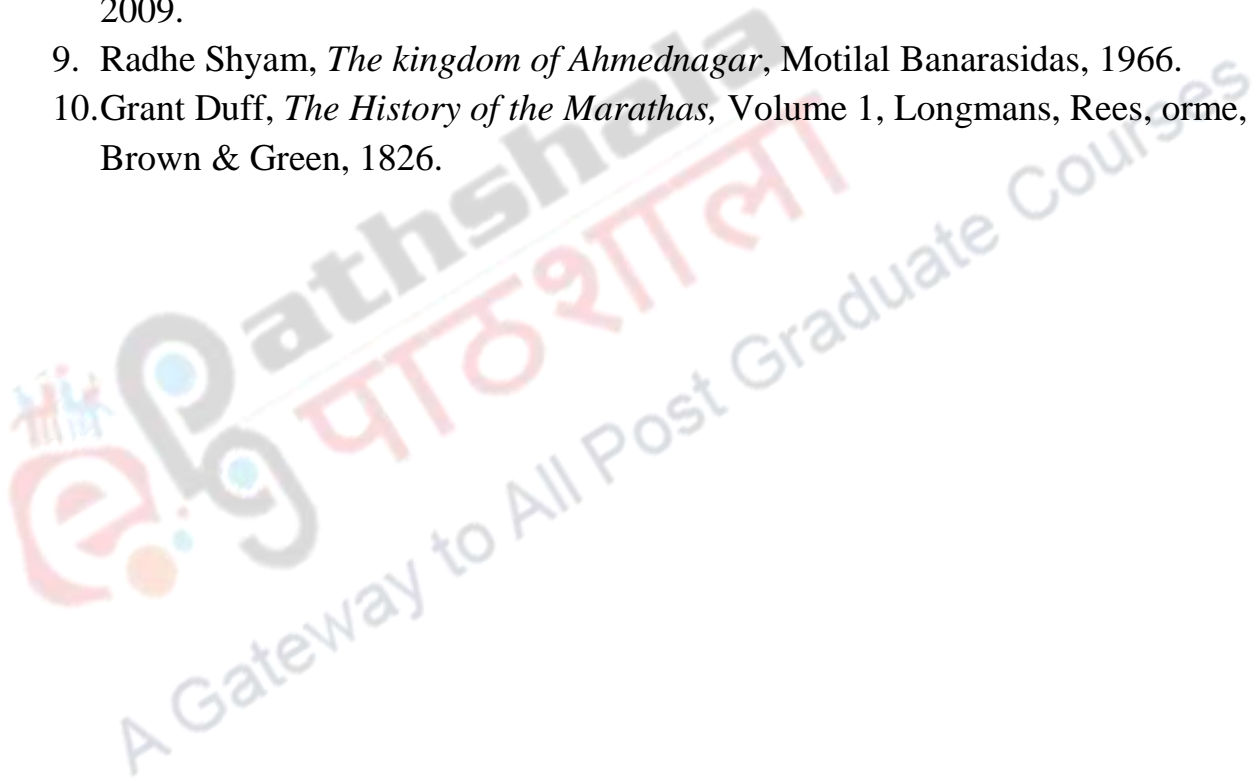
The Mughal family culture, its lineage and tradition slightly differed in this context. In the **Chagtai-Timurid** culture, women played a central role in both family and state. Chengiz Khan himself was greatly influenced by his mother and wife. Elements of this tradition trickled down into the Mughal culture. We have seen above the hardening of this tradition since Akbar's times. However, intelligent and capable women continued to influence the politics of their times. Nur Jahan was very popular. She enjoyed the same privileges and power as her husband Jahangir. Maham Anagha, Mariam Makani, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahanara were highly respected and consulted on state matters. Thus, we can say that in the medieval period women could only play an indirect role in politics but their voices were significant and effective.

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### (B) Description of Module

| <b>Items</b>                    | <b>Description of Module</b>   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Subject Name                    | Women's Studies  |
| Paper Name                      | Women and History  |
| Module Name/ Title, description | <b>Discussions On Women's Status In Early India</b> Rise Of Orientalist Writings, Nationalist And Marxist Responses And Recent Writings On Women In Ancient India        |
| Module ID                       | Paper-3, Unit-1, Module-2  |
| Pre-requisites                  | The reader is expected to have some knowledge about the debates on ancient India in the modern period  |
| Objectives                      | To understand the shifting representations of women in ancient India as reflected in the modern period after the discovery of India by Europeans and the later writings. |
| Keywords                        | Orientalism, nationalist writers, gender, sati, dharma sastras, smriti literature.   |

### The status of women in ancient India

#### Introduction

Every society has its own way of remembering the past and recording the same and handing it over to the future generations thus developing a tradition of history writing. In societies



where there is no literacy there exist a large number of oral traditions and we thus have a very large number of textual and oral traditions in India that remember the past. The Itihasa Puranas, epics, inscriptions, monuments, Persian and Sanskrit chronicles and writings and regional languages consisted of a rich tradition. With the rise of modernisation, the dominance of the West also led to the domination of the Western intellectual tradition and all other indigenous traditions of writing history in non-European societies were deemed unscientific and it led to the predominance of the Western method of writing history as the only method. (BurjorAvari, 2007). The argument for this validity and superiority of the Western method was that it was based on scientific enquiry and thus scientificity became a major criteria. With the rise of European colonialism in the 17th century, large parts of India came under the British rule, firstly under the rule of the East India company and after 1857 under the direct rule of the Crown. As part of the administrative measures to govern India, the company took a keen interest in understanding the customs and traditions of the Indian society that would help them to govern India better. In this process, the practice of writing Indian history by the West and more specifically by the English began in India. Over a period of 200 years, the indigenous tradition and knowledge systems were replaced by the Western knowledge systems. (Cohn, Bernard S, 1996)

### **Orientalism**

Evidence, verifiability and a sense of anachronism were supposed to be the three main elements of the scientific pursuit of history and thus we have the rise of learned societies in India like the Asiatic Society of Bengal that laid the foundations for writing the history of India(Ritter, Harry :1986).

Most of these practices were informed by a sense of Orientalism. Orientalism is a concept in which the East or the Oriental countries are supposed to be represented by the West. We

therefore see the development of a binary system of the Occident versus the Orient and while the Occident stood for progress, the Oriental person was represented as backward. Similarly while the societies of the Occident gave many rights to women, the Orient was represented as a despotic rule governed by Oriental despots who did not give proper rights to woman. It was this framework that the British adopted while trying to essay the history of India. Unlike the countries of Africa which did not have a literary tradition with the exception of Ethiopia, Africa was represented as a dark continent that did not have any elements of cultural advancement letter writing, kingdoms and stable cities. In the case of India most of the societies had a literary tradition or referred to the sacred texts as the source of their practices though many of the common people were illiterate and did not understand the sacred texts and therefore they could understand these texts only through the Brahmin priests who were the repositories of knowledge and were trained in Sanskrit. (Upinder Singh:2008).

It is also important to note the context in which the British came to India was after the Enlightenment process in Europe (the Enlightenment was a movement which stressed on scientificity as a reaction against the scholasticism of the mediaeval period where reason replaced belief). The reaction against Enlightenment in Europe led to the rise of the Romantic tradition which is also a part of the 19th century knowledge project. It is noteworthy here to point out that while the West represented China as a scientific civilisation, India was represented as a religious civilisation and the roots of this difference between both India and China in the western imagination can be understood when one looks at the time when the writings of on India and China begin to appear in the West. 'China was discovered by the West during the period of Enlightenment and the Europeans were thus predisposed to find science and technology in China whereas India was discovered during the Romantic period and they were thus predisposed to find religion in India'. (Frits Staal in Gavin Flood: the Blackwell companion to Hinduism).

### **Three aspects of women's representation**

We have thus identified three main aspects that went into the making of the representation of women in ancient India-Orientalism and the European method of writing history, the reliance on Sanskrit texts and Brahmin priests and thirdly the Romantic period which fixed the societies of the past as religious and their progression to science and rationality over the centuries. It is also a period of rapid social and economic change in Europe where the religious, social and community moorings of the traditional societies were torn apart and there was a rapid urbanisation which led to a nostalgia for the past. Thus many of the Romanticists found a utopia further nostalgia in ancient India and thus presented the image of India as an unchanging society. This also fitted in well with the needs of the colonial administration who represented India as an unchanging society ruled by despots and therefore needed to be administered. (Upinder Singh: 2008).

### **Some English Historians**

#### **William Jones and H T Colebrooke**

William Jones and H T Colebrooke were associated with the Asiatic Society of India and procured a large number of text in Bengal in Sanskrit and also embarked on the process of translation. They had a fascination for ancient India and then wrote about the position of women in ancient India by focusing on certain personalities like Gargi who represented in the early Vedic literature as proof of the elevated status of women in ancient India. Gargi is praised for her beauty and learning and is one of the embodiments of womanhood.

#### **James Mill**

In contrast to these writings, we also see the writings of the utilitarians like James Mill whose main goal was the ideological furtherance of British rule in India and he based his assumptions on the understandings of women as represented in the Hindu texts. According to him, the Hindu civilisation was very crude as it excluded women from large number of activities and also did not give them a share in the paternal property, deprived them of education. The Hindu men were also termed as effeminate and unfit to rule. This is largely in keeping with the ideas of the utilitarians for whom property and the courts and the law were some of the important aspects of development as these features were well marked in Britain and thus they sought to replicate this experiment of governance in India. The women of India did not enjoy a high position in the ancient period also because the men were effeminate and thus both women and men are unfit to rule. (Roy, Kumkum. 2010).

### **Katherine Mayo**

Another important work in this direction was Katherine Mayo's, *Mother India*, (1927), that a salient detail and the indignities suffered by the Indian women and the sexual excesses of Indian men and the terrible suffering of the child bride. One of the examples was of a old man was a bit over and had married a child bride in Bengal. In addition there was also the idea of sati or the burning of the women on the funeral pyre after the death of her husband when she became a widow so as to show loyalty to her husband. Both child marriage and sati were deemed to be the two important markers of subordination of women in India. They sought to trace these to the ancient Indian sources and concluded that such practices were part of the journey of Indian women from ancient to the modern period. During this time there was demand for home rule or Swaraj in India and the publication of Katherine Mayo's book was an important point of discussion as it represented the Indians as unfit to rule.

### **Max Mueller**

The other important writer to be mentioned during this period whose name is very controversial but still referred to in the writing of ancient Indian history is Max Mueller. One of the contributions of Max Mueller is the translation of most of the important sacred texts under the title of *sacred books of the East* series. As part of the series the important texts like the Vedas, Upanishads and the various epics have been translated along with the different Buddhist, Zoroastrian and other texts of the various Indic religions. One of the problems with this bottle of translation was in the little matter of translation was employed and as many extra not practised in ancient India and secondly since the meanings of the words that changed in the modern translations of ancient texts in many ways misunderstood the context. Max Mueller was a sympathetic of the ancient Indian culture and he was also dismayed by the developments in Europe. However at this time, in Europe that developed the theory of race and languages that argued for a division of the languages of the world into different groups based on certain criteria like origin words, structure and relatedness to the neighbouring languages. As part of this exercise, it was posited that both Sanskrit, Latin and Greek were part of the same family structure which had diverged in the early period. This group of languages was known as Indo Iranian languages are included languages of Europe India and Iran. Secondly, in Europe, the theory of human races are developed which posited the division of human beings all over the world into different racial groups based on certain external physical characteristics such as skin colour, eyes, nose and hair. What was illogical and dangerous about this whole scheme was that it argued for a correspondence between language and race and the sought to look for the origin of the ancient Indians in Europe. The Aryans were supposed to have migrated from Europe and all members speaking Sanskrit and the derivative languages were supposed to belong to the Indo-European stock. Similarly the texts of the Aryans in ancient India were supposed to reflect the reality of ancient Indian society. One of the problems is that most of the texts were religious texts and were only

normative and ideal and did not reflect the contextual reality. It cost a large-scale miscommunication and distortion of ancient India.(Thapar, Romila.2004).

### **Clarisee Bader**

Clarisee Bader Published,*Women in Ancient India* in 1867. She was influenced by Max Muller and wrote that women are not excluded from rituals for it is women who collected the Kusa grass for the sacred enclosure. It was this grass that was used for the Vedic rituals. Further,they had the right to offer sacrifices and compose hymns which was again based on certain scattered references in the early Brahminical texts in Sanskrit which were largely ritual manuals and were supposed to be followed by the patron of the sacrifice though there were no women as patrons. The real fall of women came with Krishna cult which was gross and materialsitic. She further argued that it is with the coming of Islam that physical and moral degradation started in India. It also fitted in well with the tripartite division of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. From the beginning of the establishment of the East India company in the Asia Tech Society of Bengal that led to the rise of Indologists, most of the writings in ancient India were written by the European scholars, mainly British and German writers. (Bader, Clarisse.2013).

### **Rise of Indian writers**

#### **R C Majumdar, A S Altekar, DD Kosambi , S A Dange**

By the 1930s we see the rise of Indian writers who are predominantly nationalists as they wanted to contest the representations of the European writers and in this process they also borrowed certain assumptions from the European writers.R C Majumdar is one of the important writers of this particular school and he argued that ancient India was one of the



most advanced periods in Indian history after which there was a fall. The Nationalists argued that the position of women in ancient India was elevated and equal and the real fall came with the rise of Islam. All these writings are created in the 20th century to suit the political and social economic contexts of India. A S Altekar's work on women in ancient India was also based on the Sanskrit texts and extolled the position of women and showed that women in ancient India had a high position. By the 1950s, the development of new tools of history also started in India and we have the rise of the Marxist school and told the important representatives of the school are DD Kosambi and S ADange. Kosambi argued that the changes in the position of women were because of the changes in the property relations and the rise of a settled agrarian society led to the rise of patriarchy and more control over women. He based his studies on the Sanskrit texts coupled with numismatics and epigraphy and analysed them in the context of historical materialism. In addition to Sanskrit texts, he also used Pali sources to examine the condition of women in the Buddhist religion. (Upinder Singh, 2008).

### **Romila Thapar**

In the 1980s and 90s, a new change came about in the study of women in ancient India with a move from the old questions of situation of women to more nuanced understandings of their role in the production process and rise of patriarchy. Romila Thapar, one of the eminent historians in ancient India argued that the changing position of the woman in ancient India as depicted in the modern texts was primarily because of the need to represent and create such a woman. She based her research on the study of the text Shakuntala. She has shown that there are many different versions of the same text and over a period of time they become more and more patriarchal to suit the ideologies of contemporary patriarchy with the result that Shakuntala becomes domesticated in the later texts and loosens the degree of freedom with which she is invested in the earlier versions. (Thapar, Romila, 2011).

The question of gender and household has become more important than the situation of women. Texts like the Therigatha, or the stories of the Theris or nuns of the Buddhist religion at one of the early texts that show alternate to family and household. These forms of association were primarily by the theris or the nuns and again shows that there was a space for decent in the Indian social and religious system. This is at a considerable distance from the domesticated woman of the Vedic and the Gupta period that were represented mainly by the Indologists and the Nationalists. The household becomes an important institution during the later Vedic period as we see that this was the period of transition, a pastoral to an agrarian society. (Upinder Singh, 2008).

### **Change in Position of women**

The women were increasingly identified in terms of their relationship with men such as wife mother and daughter. While the early writing soul into lists talked about the participation of women in the Vedic sacrifices, contemporary research has shown that only a married man along with its legitimate wife could be the patron of the sacrifice or yajmana and he had the total rights over the property and the house. Griha was the term used for house and the Grihapati was the patriarch who want all the property and also controlled it. Property was in the form of land and cattle. While there are references to women teaching or in rituals they are far and few. We also find women engaged in profession that is productive though this references in texts like the Satpatha Brahmana are also few.(Jha, Dwijendra , 2003).

The change in the position of women is concerned afflicted with the larger changes in Indian society which was missed out by both the warrantless and the Nationalists who posited a lineal continuity from the Vedic period in the mediaeval period. With the rise of the Marxist school we see that changes are explained in terms of changes in the forms of production and

material life. As the change from the early Vedic to the later Vedic period was changed from a pastoral to a settled society, a larger change in Indian society took place during the six century BC with the rise of a large number of cities in northern India. It led to changes in the form of social organisation with the rise of large territorial units known as mahajanapadas of which there were sixteen and were monarchical states. The Nationalists historians also focused on the ganarajyas or the Republican states and argued that there were elements of democracy in ancient India. Two of the important representatives of the republican states are the Buddha and the Mahavira, the founders of the Buddhist and Jain religions respectively. (Thapar, Romila. 1978).

It was during this period that there is a material progress in North India and new settlements sprang up leading to craft specialisation and trade. The most important text for the study of position of women in society during this period are the Grhyasutras other texts concerning the household and the Dharmasutras or the texts concerning the religion. In both the States we see that the household is mentioned in a very great detail and the family is one of the most important institutions with marriage being regularly mentioned. The woman was to be married off at a very early age so as to reduce burden on parents. Inheritance rights were mainly to the sons and passed along the male line. Women could not own property or manage property and thus we see that the recent tendency towards the preference for a son rather than a daughter. We also see the rise of dowry or stri-dhana given to the groom by the in-laws as part of this woman's property. Over a period of time the women lost the control over this property. Another category of people known as the Setthis also figure regularly in the texts and they are the merchants.

We also see the rise of a tradition of renouncing the world and retiring to the forests or the monasteries. It was also possible for women to pronounce the world and become nuns and it was a perfectly legitimate form of choice exercised a woman in accordance with the

contemporary religious traditions as pointed out by SuviraJaiswal. She also points out that during this period and also in the later period most of the social history can be studied from the texts of the Manu whose dharmasastra is one of the important prescriptive models for society. However she also hastens to add that such an enterprise should be supported by correspondence from other sources. During this period, that is from the six century BC to the fifth century A.D., the position of women went on declining as represented in the literature. Women are also not equated with the Shudras or the fourth varna and many of their rights were systematically lost. Special mention we made of restrictions on marriage and the withdrawal of woman from public life. While there was a preference for boys over girls many of the girls were also married off before that in the age of maturity.(Jaiswal, Suvira. 2000).

### **Maurya's and the Gupta's**

The next important period is the period of the Maurya's and the Gupta's who were the two important empires mentioned India. During their period, also we see the institution of the family becoming strengthened and the rise of control of the patriarch. Though Asoka is seen as a progressive the society of the particular period did not allow for such large-scale emancipatory measures towards women. RomilaThapar in a book Asoka and the decline of the Mauryas basis of study on three important sets of sources, the inscriptions of Asoka, the Arthasasthra-a text on economics by Kautilya and the writings of the Greek travellers. Here also we find evidence of contrition of patriarchy and evidences of restrictions on many. The duties of wife given clearly and she supposed to conform to the dictates of the husband. Though there is evidence of sati, it was not widespread and this particular aspect is a creation of the later Orientalists. The divisions between the different sections of society also became more rigid. There are evidences of matrimonial alliances between the different royal families and lineages for political convenience.

The Kamasutra of Vatsayana and the other shastras also describe different set of rules for women though there are large-scale variations among districts. We can understand that there are different straight of women and most of these texts focus only on the Royal and the landowning sections of the women whereas the bulk of the women are marginalised. While the women of the upper state are supposed to be docile and conform to aspects of domesticity, there is the relative freedom in terms of social life with regard to gender relations for the women of the lower strata as they are engaged in production oriented work along with the male members. This has picked is also seen in the vibrant folk culture. The control of the men on the sexuality of the women is also seen in this texts and the Kamasutra prescribes the life of a cultivated woman who is adept at the 64 arts. While the 64 arts are written about it is unclear whether most of the women practised all these arts as it was nearly impossible to gain mastery in all of them and they are predominantly taken to the prescriptive.

### **The post-Gupta period**

During the post-Gupta period we see the rise of many devotional cults all over India based on the bhagavata cult which later led to the bhakti movement. During this period of the bhakti movement, we see the presence of a large number of women all over India as saints, ordinary devotees and part of the religious gatherings in public. It can be explained that since religion was the only legitimate form of association and protest, most of the discontents in society were articulated through religion and we do see the presence of a number of women saints like KaraikalAmmaiyar and Andal in seventh century Tamil Nadu.(Jaiswal, Suvira. 2000)The rise of the mediaeval period in India does not make the clear break but continues with the earlier traditions and the bhakti is one of the religious movements that spreads to all parts of India till the 17th century.

## I. (A) Personal Details

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## (B) Description of Module

| <b>Items</b>                    | <b>Description of Module</b>   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Subject Name                    | Women's Studies  |
| Paper Name                      | Women and History  |
| Module Name/ Title, description | <b>Women's Education in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India</b>  |
| Module ID                       | Paper- 3 Module-16   |
| Pre-requisites                  | None   |
| Objectives                      | To make the reader understand the various developments in women's education that took place in the 19 <sup>th</sup> century, the various interpretations of this history and to attempt to reformulate this history by filling up the lacunae that exist in this history |
| Keywords                        | Proactive Reform Model, Retroactive Reform Model, Women's education in colonial India, social reform in colonial India, Eurocentricism, social reformers of 19 <sup>th</sup> century India   |



## Education and Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century India

### INTRODUCTION

The last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in India saw the growing influence of modern education under the influence of the British. As a result, a section of the Indian society evolved that was educated in this modern Western system and was influenced by the ideas of equality, justice, freedom and rational thought. These ideas were taught in the European institutions and most Indian intellectuals who comprised of this group had learnt it in these European institutions. This led to the development of a thought process in this section of the Indian society that felt that the traditional norms of Indian society were not suitable for a modern, rational society that they wanted India to grow into. The efforts of these people led to the growth of what is termed as the Reform Movements related to Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century India. In other parts of India, the educated section wanted to emulate the dominant status of the British. Hence, in order to achieve their aim, they favoured an education system and lifestyle patterned on the European model. Almost all of these reform movements focused heavily on the education of women, as it was regarded imperative for the growth of a modern Indian society. Apart from their education, other ideas such as their interaction in the public space, their participation in the freedom struggle and their rights in inheritance, marriage etc. were also discussed on a large scale. In this module we will concentrate largely on women's education, though other related aspects may also be discussed in passing.

### **Reform Movements related to Women's Education – Various Viewpoints**

Various viewpoints have evolved regarding the 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movements related to women's education. This author models the major trends of these reform movements in the following way –

- 1) The “Proactive Reform” Model - The most dominant historiography of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movements related to women's education has been that it attempted to bring improvements in women's lives. Thus, this model presents the women's educational reform movement as a constructive

phenomenon that uplifted the condition of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Srivastava, 2000, pp. 154-161).

The main focus of the proactive reform model is that it discusses the efforts to get the women introduced to the Western system of education, either at home or in school. A major stress of this education was on learning the English language, especially when the women studied in schools.

- 2) The “Retroactive Reform” Model – In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a critique of the proactive reform historiography presented above has developed. This critique mainly reformulates the 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movements to present them as retrogressive in some sense, as according to this critique, it didn’t encourage the women to emerge as independent individual. Thus, this critique underlines this reform movement as not really a feminist movement that could liberate the women from their traditional structures (Geraldine Forbes, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 92-120; Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar (Eds.), Permanent Black, 2007, pp. 58-77).

The main arguments of this retroactive reform model are –

- Reform seen as a Strategy to Maintain the Family in the Modern World – A prominent argument of the critical writings on the 19<sup>th</sup> century reforms has been that the efforts made by the reformers were not aimed at uplifting women’s conditions. Rather, they wanted to resolve the problem of continuing their family system against the changes and critiques brought by colonial India’s encounter with Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This model argues that the women were expected to become educated and modernized because it was thought that educated women would be able to perform better in their responsibilities of child-rearing and homemaking. Thus, the personal progress of women was not the main aim of this movement. It is worth noting that this thought process- of education helping women to be better homemakers- has survived to this day in many parts of India.
- Reaction against the Imperialist Eurocentric Criticism of India – The retroactive reform model contextualizes the reform movements in the light of the Eurocentric critique that many Europeans were making of the Indian society. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Europeans saw the Indian society as backward, ignorant, following false religions and restrictive practices. Hence, they felt that it was the responsibility of the European

rulers to “civilize” the Indian society. They felt that the integral part of this “civilization process” was to teach them the ideas of rationalism and modernity through education. This Eurocentric argument provided validity to the Colonial rule by projecting the Europeans as superior to the Indians. Hence, this Eurocentric discourse served to maintain the British status quo in India. English education was a part of this modernization process. The retroactive critical model being discussed here argues that the reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were mainly involved in responding to this critique of the Imperialistic Eurocentric ideologues. Hence, the reformers advocated for the women coming out of these restrictions and become educated. Thus, according to this model, the reform movements were made as a response to the Imperialistic critique from Europe and not as a conscious attempt to modernize women or to make them liberated.

- Continuation of Masculine Dominance – The retroactive reform model further argues that whatever reforms related to women were made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were in fact defined by the men, not by the women themselves. Hence, according to this historiography, these reforms reflected the changed aspirations and ideas of femininity of the educated men, not of the women. The women were expected to follow the new norms and standards set by the men, rather than evolving their own ideas, based on their own aspirations. The final decision thus, rested with the men, not the women. The retroactive reform model thus, argues that these 19<sup>th</sup> century reforms maintained the masculine dominance in the society, while setting new standards for women according to the changed situation of their own times. In this sense, these reforms were not of a high value from a feminist perspective.
- While expounding the above arguments, the retroactive reform model uses
  - 1) concepts from Western feminist theory and
  - 2) deals with issues such as women’s aspirations, control of women over their own bodies, minds and thoughts.
  - 3) Besides, issues such as women’s role in the professional arena are important in this model of historiography.

#### Reform Movements related to Women – Critical Perspectives

Both of the above historiographical models are useful in their own ways in understanding the 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movements for women. They both present

two different but related dimensions of these reforms and hence, it is necessary to be aware of both of these models.

Some of the critical perspectives on the above two models are –

- Homogenous presentation for a diverse society – both of these models present evidences from mostly the four major regions of India, to depict a more or less homogenous picture for the whole country. Thus, the picture that emerges out of these arguments appears common for the whole country. Both of these models don't focus on the vast diversity that exists in the Indian subcontinent. Especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Western influences had not yet begun to weave a common influence over the Indian society, these diversities were even more pronounced than they appear today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The following are the main points to be considered in this regard–

1) So far, not much effort has been made to understand the complex and divergent ways in which different groups of Indian society approached this issue of modernity and the education of women. Because of this complex diversity of the South Asian sub-continent, it is not plausible to have a single theoretical or historiographical model for the entire region. Very often, the reality of one region, social group or sometimes even within a family is not the reality of another.

2) On the other hand, sometimes the same equations, and forms of dominance emerge in diverse situations, but their manifestations are different. So, it is essential to understand the specific context of each region, group and community on a micro-level to comprehend any social and historical phenomenon.

3) In a diverse region like India, there is also a diversity of equations related to women and these diverse groups also resolve these equations in diverse ways. Hence, any discussion on the reforms related to women should take into account this diversity.

This module makes some efforts to show the regional diversity regarding women's history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However in absence of a wide-ranging scholarship on this viewpoint, there are lacuna in the picture being presented here, which can be filled up only by future research.

- Marginalization of many regions – In both the models discussed above, there is a major focus on the four major regions of India – East, West, North and South. These are the regions that were close to the four centres of British power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, they had an advantage because



of their proximity to power, for the British focused on their education first of all. Moreover, most of the history of the Colonial period has been focused on these four regions.

Because it has been presumed that the evidence coming from these dominant regions are homogeneously uniform for the whole, the other regions of the country have become severely marginalised in the writing of history of the Colonial India. So far, very little effort has been made to collect historical data about these marginalised regions and to reconstruct their history of the Colonial period. This problem is specially severe now because the generation that knew about the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is almost disappearing and very little effort has been made to collect information from this generation. This is especially true of the women's history. Therefore, some effort has been made in this module to collect the information about women's history about these regions from the testimonies of some people from these regions.

- Women as Agents for Patriarchy – It is often seen that patriarchal structures are perpetuated by women themselves. This is because often the women are socially conditioned to believe in and perpetrate the traditions that are detrimental to the growth of women as intelligent and independent individuals at par with men. This is true now and it was also true in the 19<sup>th</sup> century India. Besides, women are largely dependent upon men in their lives for social and economic status. Hence, they tend to remain close to men by serving their interests. Because of this, women often compete with each other to gain closeness to the men in their lives. The above two models make a simplistic contrast between men as opposed to women, rather than bringing out the complex ways in which unequal relations between men and women are negotiated in a society.

### **Developments in reform movements related to women's education**

We have discussed in the previous section that the historiography of reforms related to women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century focuses largely on the four major regions of India. On the other hand, many regions have been neglected from this scholarship. It is to be noted here that the British played a major role in initiating these changes by passing laws, opening schools for women and by initiating discussions in the society regarding women's roles. The following sections explore some of these aspects -

Four Major Regions of British India



The British had established their Presidencies or power-centres along the coastline of India. They established the Madras Presidency in 1640, the Bombay Presidency in 1687 and the Bengal Presidency in 1690. They acquired Punjab in 1849 after the two Anglo-Sikh wars. Finally, they shifted their centre to Delhi in 1912. But throughout this time, Simla served as their capital for eight out of twelve months of the year since 1864. Thus, a major part of British India's administration was actually carried out from Simla in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here, we will study some of the developments related to women in and around the core regions of British power.

- North and North-West – British colleges and schools had been opened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Lahore, Delhi and Jalandhar to create a modern educational influence. It was in this environment that in 1875 Swami Dayanand Saraswati founded his Arya Samaj. His organization had a long-lasting and profound effect on the population of Punjab, Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Western Uttar Pradesh of today. Arya Samaj advocated women's education and widow-remarriage. Kanya Mahavidyala, a prominent women's educational centre, was opened at Jalandhar in 1891 as a school first and was expanded into a college later. The system of education in Arya Samaj institutions was Anglo-Vedic and thus, derived ideas from both traditions.
- West – Bombay had been under British rule since 1687. Besides, the Parsi population in the Western India had always given importance to education and Parsi women enjoyed a high status in their society, running households and also managing commercial ventures. Even though a small community in numbers, Parsis have made large-scale contributions in the development of every sphere of modern Indian society. Hence, the region around Bombay received modern education early and the women there also participated in the political process. The Bombay University decided in 1883 to admit women in Arts, Medicine, Civil Engineering and Law on the same terms as men. The first woman to graduate from the Bombay University was Cornelia Sorabji in 1888 and she went to Oxford to study Law. Some other women to graduate at this time were Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Kashibai Kanitkar and Sharada Mehta. Pandita Ramabai was as learned as the men in her times and became a Professor at the Chettenham Women's College in England and went on to learn Maths, Science, Geography and Greek. Kashibai Kanitkar learnt both Marathi and English literature at home. Anandibai Joshi began her education at home, but finally received a Doctorate in medicine from Philadelphia. These educated women wrote autobiographies and edited journals.

A special mention needs to be made of Savitribai Phule, who opened a school for untouchable girls on 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1847. She learnt to read and write from her husband Jyotirao Phule. They both were strong advocates of women's education, caste equality, widow remarriage and spoke against child marriage. Savitribai Phule became the first woman teacher of the first girls' school in Maharashtra. She composed a collection of 41 poems, published in 1854 as *Kavyaphule*. She also published a biography of her husband (VC Pandey, Gyan Publishers, 2005, p. 113).

Mary Carpenter, a British woman, opened the branches of National India Association across India in 1875. This association was the first of its kind in India and debated on various social issues, especially those related to women. Pandita Ramabai also opened Sharda Sadan on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1889. Apart from imparting learning, it also provided some professional training to women, especially widows. Organizations such as these encouraged women to come out in public and participate in the political process, helped by the political leaders, both men and women.

- South – Christian Missionaries were very active in the Madras Presidency. By the 1840s there were six girls' schools run by the Scottish Churches alone in Madras. By 1850s, the number of girls enrolled in these schools went up to 8000. Most of these were Christian girls and the girls from the upper class Hindu families. The British government started girls' schools in 1871 in Madras. By 1891, more than 48,000 girls began to go to schools. Many of them went to co-educational schools, which was a rare phenomenon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Educated women in Madras played a vital role in organizing other women to join in the freedom struggle and in engaging in social work to spread awareness about the education and upliftment of women. Some of these women like Durgabai Deshmukh, Paturi Balasaraswatiamma, Ammu Swaminathan and Lakshmi Sehgal became political leaders. The Theosophical Society under Annie Besant played a vital role in awakening the social and political consciousness amongst the men and the women in Madras Presidency, as its headquarters was located at Adyar in Madras. It was started by Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky in 1886 (Gouri Srivastava, Concept Publishers, 2000, pp.38-50).
- East – JED Bethune, the Law Member and President of the Executive Council and President of the Council of Education, opened the first schools for girls at Calcutta in Bengal Presidency in 1849 and maintained it from his own pocket. Following him, Lord Dalhousie also continued to

maintain it and for some time spent his own money towards this cause. The spread of education in Bengal was directly linked to the British efforts. 19<sup>th</sup> century was also the period when the British passed some important laws about women's lives, at the behest of educated Indians. Although the practice of Sati had been banned as early as 1798, Lord William Bentinck succeeded in imposing a formal ban on Sati in Bengal on 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1829. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, born on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1772, is regarded as the pioneer in spreading awareness regarding women's rights in Bengal. He advocated for women's education, widow remarriage, their right to inherit property and spoke against child marriage. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a strong advocate of women's education. Rabindranath Tagore worked extensively against mistreatment of widows, child marriage, Sati and dowry.

At this time, the British passed acts against child marriage in 1891 and sanctioning inter-caste and inter-communal marriage in 1872. These acts went a long way in helping the cause of the women.

The above discussion shows a varied pattern even in the four major regions of 19<sup>th</sup> century India (Gouri Srivastava, Concept Publishers, 2000, pp. 90-114; VC Pandey, Gyan Publishers, 2005, pp. 184-238; Geraldine Forbes, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 32-63). We'll discuss this more in the summary at the end. Here we make an attempt to reconstruct the history of some other regions of India, about which almost no study has been done.

#### Some Marginalized Areas –

Almost no historiography exists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women from other parts of India. They live in the shadows of the prominent figures of the four regions mentioned above. The above historiography thus, is incomplete and leaves many lacunae and creates an impression that the picture was much the same elsewhere, which may not be always true. Here, an attempt has been made to piece together some fragments of this fast disappearing history by collecting information from various sources. Although fragmentary, this information is important and it is hoped that more research will be done before this history disappears forever. This history has been largely constructed using the oral testimonies of the people from these regions and where possible, written material has been used.

- Manipur – It is interesting that when we explore these marginalized regions, we discover that many of the questions that are so important for the four major regions discussed above are rendered as not so important

in the context of these marginalized regions. For example, in Manipur, the pre-British education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was completely suitable for the Manipuri society of that time. Since all education was oral, Manipuris could not read and write and hence, were recorded in the British records as 0.9% literate in 1901, which was not true. The fact was that the Manipuri King funded education for all. Students were educated either at the teacher's (Maichou's) house, or in the royal palace (Kangla). Women received the same education as boys in history, religion, song, dance and philosophy of life and death. Besides, Manipuri boys also received martial training so that they could join the army.

Manipuri society viewed the British education with suspicion, as they felt that an alien culture was being imposed on them. But gradually, as Missionary activities became zealous, more and more people began to get British education.

Manipuri women were fearless and took part in fighting the British and also the King when he exported rice outside. The women burnt down the British and the royal structures. Hijam Irabot was a prominent woman fighter against the British and the King. Manipur was the last Kingdom to get colonized.

- Bihar – Till 1912, Orissa and Bihar were part of the Bengal Presidency and hence, were sidelined against the core region of Bengal that received all the benefits of the proximity to power. But Bihar played a prominent role in the freedom struggle against the Colonial rule. The last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were centred greatly on Bihar, with regard to the freedom struggle of India. Bihar is not a single linguistic region. It is comprised of many linguistic and ethnic regions, each having its own socio-cultural identity. Amongst these regions, Mithila along the Indo-Nepal border is the most culturally rich and historically dominant region. It is not known to outsiders that women in Mithila have traditionally been the decision makers in the family, regardless of whether they are educated or not and whether they are doing a job or not. Men always consult women in all matters and women usually have the last word. No religious ceremonies are complete without the women's performance of their own rituals. At the same time, the caste hierarchy has been a curse for the whole of Bihar and it was especially so in the 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Women learnt to read and write at home in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But they took active part in managing the household and property. We have the accounts of Raj Kishore Choudhary and his wife



Sita Devi, Rameshwar Lal Das, his wife Yogamaya Devi and his elder brother Anand Kishore Lal Das, who joined the freedom movement and donated a large part of their property to this cause. They organized villages in Mithila to fight against the British and advocated against the caste system, untouchability, propagated women's education and fought against exploitation of the labourers. They advocated the abandoning of unnecessary rituals and spoke against restrictive practices on women such as Purdah. The women of their families became amongst the first in Bihar to become highly educated and went into professions such as law, medical sciences and university lectureships. Outside Mithila, we have names of Chandravati Devi from near Patna, Saraswati Devi from Hazaribagh (now in Jharkhand), Meera Devi from Giridih (now in Jharkhand), Shami Imam the daughter of Hasan Imam and Dr. Rajendra Prasad's sister Bhagavati Devi. They all took part in the freedom struggle against the British and worked to spread social awareness in the public sphere.

- Himachal – Simla was the British capital for most part of the year. Because of this and also because of the Missionary activities, Simla has many girls' schools from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rev. Michael Wilkinson started girls' education at Simla in 1848. Himachali women are again very active in the public sphere and Himachali society is very diverse in matters of social practices related to women. However, till date the names of Himachali women active in the public sphere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have been hidden from history (*Gazetteer of Simla District*, Indus, 1998 (Reprint), pp. 111-114).
- Uttar Pradesh – Aligarh was a major centre of activity of the Muslim League and of Sayyed Ahmed Khan, the leading advocate of Muslim youths' modern education. However, in 1882, when the British asked him to testify about the education of Muslim girls, he surprisingly testified against this idea and said it may not work. But despite his opposition, the British opened schools in UP. The Muslim girls' schools had been running in Lucknow since 1868 onwards. Gradually, schools opened in Faizabad, Nawabganj, Pratapgarh, Bulandshahar and Agra, with Missionary and British government's support. In Faizabad and Lucknow these girls came from the upper-class families, as they could come on the palanquins. But in other areas, they came from the lower strata, because the *pardah* system prohibited the upper-class girls to come out. In comparison to Muslim girls studying in schools, very few Hindu girls joined school, as they married very young. However, Muslim women's participation in the public sphere in Uttar Pradesh (called the United Provinces at that time) was not



very visible (Firdous Azmat Siddiqui, online article, link - [http://www.muslimsocieties.org/Vol 4 No 2 Growing Consciousness for Education.html#\\_edn59](http://www.muslimsocieties.org/Vol 4 No 2 Growing Consciousness for Education.html#_edn59)).

- Kerala – Kerala had a society where the matrilineal system was very popular. Because of this, women had enjoyed greater importance than the men since pre-modern times. They played a major role in decision-making and property management, even without modern education. On the other hand, there were Christians who had the patriarchal system. But they enjoyed proximity to power and had access to good Christian education. There were also the Dalit groups such as those from the fishing and labourers' communities, who were outside the power network. The Muslim population of Kerala was diverse, with converts from the matrilineal groups still maintaining the matrilineal system, while others following the patriarchal system. Thus, although small, Kerala had a complex social structure, with women enjoying varying degrees of prominence across this social spectrum. Kerala received modern education quite early and not by British support, but by the efforts of the Maharani of Travancore. She got an English school opened for girls in her region in 1859. This school was attended mostly by the upper-class girls.

Apart from the English schools run by the Missionaries, there were educational institutions run by the natives of Kerala, who stressed not only on English, but also on the indigenous knowledge system of Kerala, somewhat similar to the efforts of the Arya Samaj. Prominent among them were Sri Narayana Guru, born in 1856, who preached Vedic knowledge but spoke against the caste system, Yogakshema Sabha where again Vedic knowledge was imparted along with modern education and insistence was on throwing off the shackles of unnecessary rituals and Wakkom Abdul Kadir Moulavi, who was a scholar, social reformer, journalist and freedom fighter. He advocated modernization of the Muslim community by acquiring modern education, shedding off unnecessary religious practices, education of women and also fought for freedom ((Gouri Srivastava, Cosmos Publishers, 2000, pp. 90-99).

#### Directions for Future Research

The above discussion gives us the matrix of the very diverse pattern of the reform movements related to women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, this history is still very fragmentary and more research needs to be done in this field. Some of the directions future research can take are –

- Gathering narratives from the old people – Before this invaluable resource dies out, there is a need to collect it by interviewing and recording the narratives from old people. They can tell us about the women's condition as they may have heard from their elders as children.
- Including the multitudes of the uncovered areas – Even though some regions have been covered in this study, there are many regions, social groups and communities that have not been studied. Future researchers can take up such unstudied areas and collect information from the old people, archives, newspapers, Internet and other resources to present a less fragmentary picture.
- Thinking about new ways of research – Some arguments have been discussed in this Unit. However, as new evidences emerge, the researcher should think about new ways of interpreting this information, in order to understand it better.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion in this chapter shows that even in the same category of historical study, there may be vast variations. For examples, there were innumerable reformers in Bengal working for the women's cause. But it's remarkable that most of the prominent figures were men, unlike the Bombay and Madras Presidencies discussed above, where women were visibly active in public in this sphere. Again, it is to be remembered that Sati was a specific problem prevalent in Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and less frequently in Tamil Nadu and coastal Andhra Pradesh. It was not practiced in many other parts of India. Hence, a history of Sati in Bengal cannot be a history of the whole of India. Again, Kerala is a good example of complex diversities within a small region. Therefore, a single theoretical model can't be applied to the whole of India or even to a small region like Kerala or Mithila. Bringing more information from other parts of India will further modify the history of reform movements in India and we should be willing to accept this change.

## Women' in Indian Art

M.N. Rajesh and Rekha Pande

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### (B) Description of Module

| Items                              | Description of Module  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Subject Name                       | Womenø Studies   |
| Paper Name                         | Women and History  |
| Module Name/ Title,<br>description | <b>Women in Indian art:</b> To look at the representation of women in Indian art.  |
| Module ID                          | Paper-3, Module-12   |
| Pre-requisites                     | To know the different kinds of art forms that we have in India   |
| Objectives                         | The present module aims at introducing art history.<br><br>It looks at different kin ds of art forms and how women are represented in these. |
| Keywords                           | Royal art,Yakshi images, Paintings, Temple art<br><br>Miniature paintings  |

## Women in Indian art and miniature paintings in Pre Modern India

6

M.N. Rajesh and Rekha Pande

### Introduction:

Art history has now been accepted as a major branch of knowledge supplementing various other kinds of History. Art as a manifestation of human thought and spirit has valuable implications for a historian to conduct a thorough investigation into the intricacies of the past. A different perspective of women's history is gaining currency in which the art forms like paintings are being used as tools of historical investigation. Feminism in the arts grew out of the contemporary women's movement. In the 1970's feminist historians and critics began to question the assumptions, which lay behind the masculine claim for universal values of history of heroic art and which has so systematically excluded women's productions and representations from its mainstream and so powerfully transformed the women's image into position of consumption. 'Malestream' is a term frequently used in feminist critiques. The resulting re-examination of women's lives in art proceeded amidst debates about the relationship between gender/culture and creativity (Chadwick 1990: p. 8 ). The development of theories about the way meanings are produced, semiology in particular and the expanded Marxist concepts of ideology, led feminists to a more complex appraisal of what came to be called, representations. No longer could images be treated as discrete reflections - good, bad, false, truthful - of real women. The use of the term representation and later significance marked the importance of the process by which meanings are produced. The social manufacture of meaning occurs through both technical devices and codes and conventions generally referred to as the rhetoric of the image. For anyone to understand the image s/he must carry a whole baggage of social knowledge, assumptions and values. Therefore notions of the image whose meanings derive from the conscious intentions of their makers gave way to the understanding of the social and ideological networks within which meanings are socially produced and secured. After almost two decades of Feminist writings about women in art, there remains relatively a small body of work in history of women and art.

There are very few works, which identify women as subject of representation not as an object of representation.

### **Study of Art in 19<sup>th</sup> century:**

In the 19th century, one of the important developments in Indian history is the displacement of indigenous knowledge by the colonial knowledge and in the case of India a lot of work has already been done on these lines with regard to the history and political economy. However, with regard to Art and architecture, there still seems to be many areas that are in the process of being worked out. One of the main problem is the collapse of the indigenous categories and a traditional methods of reading art and architecture and replacing the same with European models which has done much injustice and also distorted many meanings. When we talk about European categories, we mean the ideas of the Victorian age that led to an emphasis on morality and characterised Indian art as degenerate and lacking in morality. The terms, idolatry, demonolatry and associated terms became much prevalent along with adjectives like unrefined, crude, scantily clad et cetera. (Burgess 1901: 104) With the rise of the National School that coincided with the Indian national movement a method of studying Indian art by moving away from the Victorian prejudices had begun. While this was at one level a corrective measure intending to right the wrongs done by the Britishers, it ultimately lead to another set of assumptions replacing the Victorian assumptions and also borrowing from the Victorian ideas at the same time (Thakurta 2005:43).

### **Art following Colonial Archaeology:**

With nearly examples of Indian architecture and art, the previous framework of explanation that was in tune with the colonial archaeology followed and what was represented was the measurement of the statues and the different structures. There was a stress on the quantitative aspects and absolutely no regard to any description of style and evolution of the different aspects of style It led to a very dry and monotonous writing which is evident in the work of the colonial writers like Havell and Burgess. The early Indian writers also follow this framework but traced the origins of our two ancient India and give them a divine origin. To search for the origins of art



and architecture in India, the materials used were the texts and thus the Vegas and the other early Indian Sanskrit texts form the basis for the identification and description of art which was formed Thakurta 2005:50).

A new turn was introduced in the 1930s and 40s by writers like Basham and another writer, the famous Ananda Coomaraswamy whose celebrated work Indian and Indonesian art, followed by a writer like Gopinath Rau whose work on iconography is referred even today unseated writers like Percy Brown. Basham described Indian art as emanating from religious motivation and also to serve religious ends. In all this enterprise, the gender question was only marginally represented and the 1960s saw the predominance of Marxist historians who try to emphasise art with the social and political context of that particular period. The Hindu temple and the icons were taken to reflect the feudal values. (Coomaraswamy : 1918 reprint 2005) Another strain was evident in the writings of art historians like Stella Kramrisch, who famous work the Hindu temple has remained as a seminal work and also her lesser-known work, Indian sculpture is also another important landmark in this field (Kramrisch : 1976). It is only with the rise of postcolonial studies that writers like Partha Mitter, who celebrated work much maligned monsters, has rehabilitated Indian art rescuing it from the colonial categories that inform the study of Indian art and architecture (Mitter : 1992) . Gender also thus became an important category of analysis to understand Indian art and works like slaves of the Lord, and Barbara Stoler Miller's, the powers of art, have led to a fundamental re-orientation of the discipline. (Miller : 1992)

### **Nationalist Historians:**

Indian art was studied by the nationalist historians as a product of glorification of ancient India and thus saw the early examples from the ancient period being studied. Most of the earliest icons and architectural structures of ancient period were Buddhist and we have for example the sculptures of the Mauryan period. However, the archaeological excavations in the 1920s pushed Indian history further back and the discovery of the industrial civilisation was highlighted with a period assigned to two and half thousand years before Christ and thus it predated the Vedic

civilisation. In the Indus Valley civilisation, we have found few examples of art and the most famous of these are the bearded man Harappan statues of animals and the meditating man now identified as a proto-Shiva. In addition to this there is also a female figurine now known as the harappan dancing girl. It is an image of a slender girl with a lot of ornamentation in the form of bangles and beads and necklaces over the upper part of the body. Bead was one of the most important commodities manufactured in the Indus and is also traded to the neighbouring regions of Afghanistan, Iran and the ancient near East including Mesopotamia. One of the issues connected with the origin of the Indus civilisation is the theory of the Mesopotamian origin advanced by Wheeler and later by Ratnagar. It is this tempting to associate the dancing girl with the influence from the ancient near East where the worship of Goddesses like Ishtar was widely popular. Though this is not being accepted in stream art history and history circles. In addition we also find a large number of toys and animals and also representations of human figures and figurines on seals. We are unable to decipher the seals as the language is still eluded any translation. From the proper historic period, when remote early historic period, we only find little depictions of goddesses in the Sanskrit literature of the early and later Vedic periods and also in the period of the Upanishads. There are references to goddesses like usha the goddess of dawn. We still have to wait for some more centuries to look at these gods and goddesses in anthropomorphic form. Fire was the dominant form of worship and fire altars were constructed for use during a certain ritual period and later dismantled after the sacrifices were done by the Brahmins. In the six century BC, there was a sudden spurt of cities in India and this period is known as the second urbanisation in India after the rise of a decline of the Indus Valley civilisation that was known as the first urbanisation. It was during this second urbanisation that we have the emergence of strong political entities like kingdoms and Republican states with strong kings who also acted as patrons of art and architecture. (Singh : 2008: 174).

If we look for Women in Indian art we can find this in different places such as

- Royal art,
- Yakshi images,
- Paintings,
- Temple art and
- Miniature paintings

## **Royal Art:**

The early art that is seen during this period is predominantly royal art and some of the important themes are associated with Buddhism. Even till this time, the idea of representing the divinity in anthropomorphic form was absent in Buddhism, though the Indian artist had attained sufficient grip in the depiction of the human form. The earliest images of women in India (excluding those of the Indus valley civilization) are a set of Mauryan period figurines (Dhavalikar, 1999: 178-9). These figures are not the first art objects to represent the feminine. Leaving aside the figures of the Harappan civilization which appear to be stylistically and culturally unconnected with anything in the historic period, there are terracotta images, believed to represent fertility or mother goddess figures. These are not images, they are symbols. They do not pretend to represent the physical impression of the female form. The basic garment of the Indian women of Mathura in the Kusana era was a sort of Sari which usually hung from the waist down. Many women also wore a long shawl or scarf over both shoulders. Around the hips was a broad and elaborate girdle with beadwork and decorative clasp in front. The breasts were usually uncovered (there is some controversy as to whether this was the actual practice, or merely an artistic convention)" (Salamon, 1989:40).

The art of this period displays two types of influences, one emanating from the folk traditions and another emanating from the Royal Court and it is also now surmised that there was influence of Iran on the Mauryan court art as seen in the columns and pillars. It was also during the Mauryan period that the practice of Buddhism gained much headway. After the passing away of the Buddha, known as the Maha Pari Nirvana, the remains of the Buddha were encased in a dome after cremation and this was known as the stupa. One of the function of the stupa was the reliquary function and another function was the votive function where the faithful gathered and circumambulated the votive stupa in a clockwise fashion. While the Buddha was not worshipped in anthropomorphic form and represented only by a throne which was empty, footprints or a parasol, the other personalities both human and mythical associated with the life of the Buddha were represented in human form. One of the important representation that recurs again and again is the birth of the Buddha and Queen Mayadevi, the mother of the Buddha is shown in the garden with sal trees and a six tusked white elephant miraculously enters her side. Later she reaches out for a branch and the the Buddha is born. The scene is replicated again and again in the major

traditions of India, Sanchi, Barhut and Mathura which are the early arts traditions of India. In all these representations we find along with the Buddha, who is represented in the form of an aniconic image, a host of people from both the royalty and the laity. Such scenes are also common in Amaravati in southern India. While the focus of the earlier historians is largely on patronage patterns, we can make a small departure and look at the role of women. It is paradoxical that women are seen in sizeable representation as royal women along with their attendants in different dresses and regalia along with the attendants were represented differently showing forms of subordination.

### **Yakshi Images:**

Yakshi is a female earth spirit, accepted as a symbol of fertility by the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain faiths. She is usually portrayed as a wide-hipped, voluptuous woman, who can cause a tree to bear fruit simply by touching it with her foot. The yakshi's three-bend pose (tribanga), bending at her neck, waist, and hips, is a stance that suggests a sensuous liveliness and maternal energy. This representation also shows the figure adorned with jewelry and the suggestion of a transparent skirt, revealing an abundantly endowed female body that symbolizes the fertility of the earth. Sculptures of yakshi are often seen in elaborate architectural motifs on the façades of temples and stupas. The most celebrated pieces of art in ancient India is the Didarganj yakshi who is represented along with a fly whisk called as chauri. Her hair is well done with decoration on the hair and ornaments on the hair and the neck. The upper part of the body is not covered and is well developed along with ample flesh that gives a sense of voluptuousness indicating that she has sexual energy and is an object of sexuality. The development of imagery also proceeds along these lines with examples from Amaravati showing the prosperity of the common man and woman as depicted in the good folk motifs. In barhut and sanchi along with Mathura we come across large number of women from the labouring classes. They are dressed in smaller tunics and also wear turbans and unlike the semidivine beings, these women are keen and slender. (Singh : 2008: 449-453).

## **Paintings:**

Another great age of painting begins in the aftermath of the Gupta period with Ajanta paintings that are done on a hill in the caves. The caves ó the excavation, sculpturing and painting ó were completed in two phases: the first during 2nd-1st centuries BCE, belonging to the Hinayana period and the next during a period of two and a half centuries starting from the 4th century CE, when it was the Mahayana phase. Here one can see the progress from the early phase of cave paintings in the pre-Christian era, reaching classical perfection, to the movement into mannerism and then to baroque ornamentation and, finally, the lapse into artistic decline before the caves were ultimately abandoned by the 6th century CE. The subjects of the pictures are chosen mostly from the Jataka stories, Buddhist mythological tales of the previous lives of the Buddha. Episodes from the life of the Buddha form the next important theme in Ajanta. Some of these are mostly self-contained, whereas some are narrative, moving from scene to scene. A few of the solo-pictures do not seem to have any religious import. The paintings in the last category are decorative in character. Floral decorations, geometrical designs, birds, animals, mythical nymphs and monsters fill up every square inch of available space ó on the ceilings, pillars, etc. The ceilings contain paintings, mostly of secular and decorative themes. Under the technique of Indian mural painting, which was followed with little change in all later examples of mural decoration in Asia, murals were painted on an almost dry wall, called 'fresco'. The artists of Ajanta used a wide variety of pigments. Most of them were minerals available locally as residual products of volcanic rock. Only lapis lazuli, used for blue, was imported. (Spink : 2005) : Most of the paintings are made of mineral and vegetable dyes in Ajanta and the subject matter of representation follows the same pattern with the Buddha and the bodhisattvas and the kings and queens merchants and common people. The women are shown here mainly as Queens accompanied by Kings or as part of certain group. In this situation many of them are unrestrained and also shown in well-dressed vestments. We also find evidences of women drinking and one of the painting shows the king being served by a foreigner, most probably a person from Persia looking at his dress. Following dance traditions, the paintings cover a range of postures, from frontal to strict profile, which have been identified with distinct terminology used for each posture. From the beginning of the Mahayana phase, in Ajanta one cannot find a single scene in which



the poses of characters are monotonous. This is particularly so with the depiction of women shown in congregation. One can notice restricted body positions, tending to monotony, in the pre-Christian Hinayana paintings. The whole range of women characters ó ladies of court and their maids, common women in their household chores, and dancers ó can be seen in Ajanta.(Spink :1987 :38-44)

### **Temple Art:**

Another great age begins in the early mediaeval period from around the fifth century A.D. with the rise of the Hindu temple and they are spread across large parts of northern India and down into southern India and the South spawning three major traditions in the history of Indian architecture namely, the Nagara or the northern style with domes looking inside like the petals of the onion. The Southern style of architecture is pyramidal in shape and called the Dravida, while there is another style of architecture which is a mixture and said to be the vesara in the Deccan. We now find a large number of images of goddesses, gods and many other minor deities in the temple complexes. The rise of the temple was also because of the spread of the institution of land grants and the temple acted as a major institution for agrarian expansion. It also was an institution for redistribution of the economic surplus and also a means of political integration. Primarily a religious institution, the temple synthesised many different forms of worship through a process known as syncretism where many gods and goddesses were identified with the main deities. In this connection we see the predominance of the shaiva, vaishnava and the shaka traditions. There are three processes associated with the expansion of temples and this is known as the major process of agrarian expansion: irrigation is a technological component whereby artificial waterways were created to irrigate land, transforming the forest into settled agricultural land. The second process followed from this and it led to the conversion of the tribal people into peasants in a caste hierarchy. In the third process the peasants now had numerous gods and therefore their gods were identified with the major Puranas and the traditions flowing from these texts. Thus, we therefore have a large number of deities in the early mediaeval period. One of the examples is of Vishnu who is given 10,000 names meaning, it explains the process by which 10,000 deities were identified as Vishnu through the process of syncretism. Thus, we have a large number of attributes for different gods and goddesses.(Chattopadhyaya :1996:12-44)

Most of the deities were sculpted according to set parameters as prescribed in the silpa texts where the exact measurements and methods of representation were described. For gods and goddesses, we have the nine spans of measurement, eight spans for semidivine beings and seven or less for humans and other lesser deities like tutelary deities. There are two forms of representation largely seen with regard to the feminine. In most of the mainstream temples, the female deity was always shown as the consort of the Lord and was seated by the side of the Lord. Parvati, Lakshmi and other deities like Sita were all shown in this way. All deities also had a pose (asana) and a (vehicle ) which is usually an animal and certain arms and accoutrements. The goddesses did not have any animals as vehicles. For example we see that a peacock is associated with Subrahmanya, or Kartikeya the son of Shiva and so on. While Vishnu is shown with a wheel known as the Sudarshana chakra in his hand, we see Saraswati having a musical instrument known as the Veena. The interesting case of Lakshmi who is popularly represented in eight incarnations each bestowing a different boon to the devotee reveals the iconography. Dhana Lakshmi is shown as bestowing gold coins from her hand. In contrast to the consorts of the deities in the Shaiva and the Vaishnava temples, we see in the Sakta temples terrifying goddesses like Durga and Kali were represented alone and do not need a male consort. Further, they are also shown with weapons like the Trident which is a very famous weapon associated with Shiva is also associated with Durga and she also has a tiger as her mount. This is in contrast to the demure deities were domesticated like Lakshmi and Parvati. Kali is one of the most popular deities in eastern India and she's shown scantily clad and holding a big Sword in one hand and a necklace of human heads or in many cases a single head in one hand usually in the left-hand. Blood is associated with her and she is shown independently.

In the imagery of deities, the progress in the depiction of the form increases over the period and in the earlier period dating to the seventh and eighth century A.D., we have the elephanta caves in Maharashtra and also the famous Ellora temple near the Ajanta Caves. This was one of the early stages of rock architecture wherein the artist did not achieve a high level of mastery over the stone and thus we have large size of the human bodies and also the bodies of the gods and goddesses. With the development of the Hindu temple and its elaboration, the iconographic program became more complex. It was also made much more complex by the impact of the

bhakti movement which was the religious movement that incorporated aspects of social protest also.

In the regular iconographic program of the temple, the main deity is located in the sanctum sanctorum of the garbagriha and it is usually Shiva or Vishnu in their different incarnations with the consorts. This spread of different incarnations or avatars was one of the devices used to accommodate the regional and folk traditions read the pan Indian or the Sanskriti tradition and the state by students of history as the great and Little traditions. The local gods and goddesses are identified with a Puranic deities like Shiva and Vishnu. The names of the deities are also changed and Shiva is known as Mallikarjuna in the temple at Srisailam along with the tribal goddess who is identified as Parvathi. This particular process also involved the process of associating it with that particular place and is known as localisation of action. Thus, Kashi one of the most sacred places in the Hindu cosmology was replicated both in the north and in the south by giving different names as Uttarkashi and Tenkasi with Shiva in both the places in different incarnations.

It would also be prudent to take a small diversion to another most important and impact making sculptures of early mediaeval India, the khajuraho temples in central India. These temples have aroused great curiosity and also become highly contested on account of the nature of the erotic figures in this temple complex. There are around 32 temples are complex and a majority of them belong to the Hindu tradition while some of them belong to the Jain tradition. The major problem of contestation with regard to these temples is the representation of amorous couples in different states of sexual union known as mithuna. Some of them are couples while others are in pairs and in groups. Most of the parts of the body are shown with ample features. This has been taken as an example of sexual licentiousness in mediaeval India. An analysis of the sculptures all over early mediaeval India shows that most of the women did not wear any dress on the upper body and left it uncovered and they also had many other freedoms.

As mentioned the rise of the bhakti movement led to the popularisation of religion by adopting the local vernacular languages like Tamil Telugu Kannada Malayalam, Bengali, and different dialects of Hindi to express devotion directly to the deity without any mediation. Most of the

devotion was mainly in the form of an outpouring to the emotional sense. In this way also see the emergence of many saints and the rise of sacred geography is associated with the saintly figures. Some of the important saintly figures are Karaikal Ammaiyar, Akka Mahadevi and Meera. We know how many of their statues adorning the temples and this came about by the expansion of the iconographic program as part of the tutelary shrines in the temple which was not part of the original plan but had to be accommodated due to popular pressure and thus we have the temples to the women bhaktas and also the mother goddesses in many important temples all over India and over a period of time they also became part of the statute of sacred geography and thus the temple at Kashi, Brihadaswira, etc all have now large shrines for various goddesses. Another aspect of this is the development of special patterns of worship on occasions of festivals. (Peterson :1991:103-110, 143-9) Meera is largely worshipped by singing bhajans which developed as a form of devotion popularised by Mira signifying her steadfast devotion to Krishna. Thus may arise always depicted in a white dress signifying that she's given up the pressures and is waiting for union with Krishna.

### **Sculptures and art in Medieval India:**

Most of the sculptures by the 13th century in North India become less numerous with the advent of the Turkish rule and new temples and sculptures are being constructed only in places like Gujarat and Rajasthan. The iconographic program also becomes very enlarged with a number of demigods shown with long-awaited features like a protruding tongue, elongated teeth and large eyes and ears. Both male and female, these deities are largely malevolent and sometimes also benevolent. There are also large number of intermediaries like the gatekeepers and also different women who are part of a retinue signifying the cruellest quality of that period. Sculptures are more numerous in southern and eastern India and are largely devoted to the deities of the Purana.

Metal sculptures also seem to be popular along with stone sculptures and the metal sculptures are taken in a procession along with the main deity and the consort by the side, once a year. In addition to the deities like Lakshmi Parvati, we also have many other local goddesses and one of the important developments from the period that included 17 centuries is the addition of more and more ornaments and paraphernalia to the deities. While granite was largely used in South India, black sandstone was used in eastern India and marble became more popular in northern



and western India. Metal was used only in some cases but is more popular in Kashmir where we also find large number of Tantric sculptures in many parts of eastern India. The Tantric sculptures also show many elements of sexual union. (Miller : 1992:79)

Developments in the plastic arts also went parallel to the development in painting and the various schools of painting in mediaeval India like Sittanavasal and Madurai and the Chola paintings in Tamil Nadu and the Lepakshi in Andhra continued to depict the human form. There was a clean deviation from the centre style as the forms became more bulky and rounded and the colours also became more earthy. There is also a focus on the local elements in the form of festivals, dress, processions and courtly procedures.

One of the important areas that has not been studied in mediaeval India is the Tibetan culture area of India that stretches along the western and eastern Himalayas and has preserved the Buddhist culture even after the disappearance of Buddhism in the 13th century India. Tabo and Alchi built during the 10th century are for the most important representations of this tradition. The latter is called as the advent of the Himalayas on account of a large number of paintings in the walls and these murals are very important as they show the Tara and other female deities. After two centuries many more monasteries are built in the western and eastern Himalayas in the Tibetan tradition but the major change that comes across is the replacement of the Indian tradition by the Central Asian traditions whereby blue colour and clouds in the paintings and the elongated cheekbones and the epicalantic fold become more pronounced. We also have large number of female deities who are the consorts of the bodhisattavas and also the reincarnations of many deities. The most important of them are Phalden Lhamo identified with Sri Devi and the deity Dorje Phagmo who is identified with the goddess Marici Vajravarahi. (Handa 2004:290-300)

A new development in India are seeing the 18th century with the rise of ivory carving and this is particularly in southern and northern India where many small figurines are made of ivory. Though this practice of carving in ivory was also present earlier, the 18th century witnessed the new spurt in this activity and we have here many representations of women in stylistic poses, seen as the concubines or the correlate of the other woman in literature. Kings and queens along



the major deities are also shown but are rare as we have very few ivory carvings associated with religious practices. Intricacy was one of the main features and care was taken to show the face and adornments along with the other figures in a very small area. Metal were also acquired a new lease of life and metal statues with some European influences are seen but are very few in number

### **Miniature Paintings:**

The term 'miniature' is derived from the Latin word 'minium' that meant red lead (*The Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol.19, 1976,170). As the principal pigment used by the medieval illuminators was red lead, it began to be applied to the art and those who practiced it came to be known as 'miniatori'. Even though the word is applied to all works of art of 'miniature' size, miniature paintings meant a very small portrait paintings finely executed on vellum (skin), prepared cards, copper or ivory, jewellery, boxes, lockets, palm leaves and paper. Due to the patronage of the rulers and rich gentry the themes of the miniature painting mainly centered around the royal court, pursuit of hunting and other pleasures rather than the toiling masses who formed the bulk of the population. Though the common man was not involved directly in the aesthetic aspect of the paintings, yet it did offer a number of employment opportunities and this must have been a major reason for interest. The karkhanas where most of the production of miniatures took place were workshops which employed the energies of the common man and artists who were proficient in the production of painting material and in preparing paper, brushes and colors.

The representation of women in these miniatures brings to light varied types of miniatures with different themes and styles executed on the solid platform of royalty. The portrayal covers various realms like their work, dress, jewellery highlighting their status and role. To the artists of the Deccan, the womanly form itself became a source of interest and a number of miniatures were executed depicting a variety of royal and local beauties. Apart from revealing certain situational realities in which the women were placed, the pictures also confirm the unending interest of Indian art tradition and its delight in feminine conduct. By and large the paintings depict women or royalty and court scenes which were male bastions of power but we do have the depiction of common women as well. As the miniatures in the medieval Deccan own their

existence chiefly to the royal patronage, quite often, they naturally echo the personal predilections and personality of the persons of royalty namely Queens and Princesses. These paintings represent a male gaze of women as idealized symbol of royal splendor and their power and participation in political endeavours. These miniatures depicting the court life of women or dramatic episodes of the court, highlight that few women enjoyed political power in medieval India and that there was not complete absence of female portraiture in Islamic art, as Queenø and Princesses appear side by side with the King in most of the pictures. In totality, apart from symbolizing the royal power of the women, they also depict their costumes, jewellery and decoration which are rich in style and royal in outlook. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the courts of Deccani Kingdoms, several conventional systems of music ragas and raginis were apostrophized as ladies and pictures were made to indicate their themes (Archer WG, *Indian Miniatures*, Greenwich, 1960. Plate 14). Ragas denoting masculine and raginis denoting feminine became a popular trend. These nuances of music which began to be used in visual art incorporated the tradition of classical poetry, namely, the Nayaki-Nayaka lore which minutely analyses the moods of men and women in all vicissitudes of love, the agony of waiting, ranging grief in separation and joy in union. This tradition of *Nayaki-Nayaka* themes was a much sought after subject for Deccani miniature paintings for it could depict the female form in all its beauty which would appeal to the male gaze. In this theme women have been represented as *Abhisarika* or Nayika waiting for Nayaka in different conditions or situations of love with different emotions, like waiting anxiously in expectation, one who hopefully waits, one who is depressed or cheated or one who ruefully writes a message. The females become an objects of love. In totality, Ragmala paintings revolved around love-sick ladies and their intense feelings of love, hope and distress with sensitive expressions. At Golconda, during Abdullah Qutub Shahø period certain ragini paintings were executed. For instance a manuscript entitled *Khawar Nama*, dated C 1645-49 AD consists ragini paintings like Gurjari ragini and Saragini ragini (Nigam ML, 1988. 40 ).

A significant sphere in which women were reflected and illustrated at Deccani courts under royal patronage were women depicted as Yoginis. Most of these miniatures of Yoginis executed belong to Bijapur and Golconda period. Yoginis are depicted with beautiful facial features presenting a look of nobility. They are invariably shown with matted hair raised up ward and

carrying either a monarchical (Peacock feathers) or a trident in one of the hands some times they are depicted holding a musical instrument *ektata* or a fan made of peacock feathers. Their garments consisted of tight brocaded *pajamas*, a *khesa* (upper garment of bhagava or saffron color), a *zari dupatta*, elongated *jama*, long *dupattas*, a scarf over her hair and embroidered band. The Yoginis wear shoes and are covered with ornaments like necklace (*selhi*) made of pearls ear rings (*mudari*) made of rubies, wristlets studded with gems and rosaries as bracelets (Nigam, 1988, 35). This suggests the high descent and aristocratic dignity of the Yoginis. In spite of these decorations Yoginis used to smear their bodies with ashes and applied *quashqa* (paste of sandal on the forehead which gives them the look of an ascetic). An important feature of medieval Golconda miniatures depicting women is that apart from the usual representations of women of royalty, several illustrations of common women like maidens, artists, courtesans, engaged in royal service and entertainment and other local women performing their day to day activities like praying, smoking, distributing *hukka* and playing music were painted. These illustrations breathe with life and capture the intense feelings of the women.

Though most of these women are in serving roles, beauty formed an important part in these paintings. A miniature by Ali Naqi of Golconda illustrates a woman admiring herself and her beauty in a mirror. (Zebrowski, 1983, 149). A maiden helps women in decorating herself. All the toilet tier substances are kept in a plate at the bottom of the miniature and the lady in attendance is helping her mistress to dress up and the mistress has the final word if she is satisfied or not. Both the mistress and the maid are shown with beautiful curves and there is not much class difference, which one can see here in terms of depiction and both are objects of desire. Another painting, datable to late Seventeenth century, comprises of a brilliantly sensual sleeping girl. In this miniature there is an alluring tropical world spring to life. One can almost feel the warm breeze and the languid pace. Delicate twist of loose-end garments and serene expressions of the girl suggest both inner contentment and sexual joy and beauty. Here, both the sleeping girl as well as maiden is richly ornamented. There are a number of food and other luxury items lying on the floor. The plantain tree, which is regarded as very auspicious for the Hindus, can be seen in the background. Although such pungent celebrations of life are profoundly Indian, they are more frequently encountered in sculpture than in miniature paintings. Hence this illustration acquires an importance among the miniatures representing the sensual life of women. Another miniature painting illustrates a beautiful girl, expressing her beauty (Stuart C. Welch, 1963, Plate

13). Narrow waisted and voluptuous, she wears a transparent red, green and orange costume, trimmed with gold and tarnished silver. A rich group of pearls, gold jewellery is set with green and orange stones. The overall features of the girl with the background of shimmering gold sky streaked with orange and blue clouds augment her radiance and beauty. A few stylistic elements of this painting like gold, red-orange, blue sky and feathery tree are peculiar to Golconda painting. The overall feeling is of voluptuousness and beauty.

In the miniatures depicting courtesans, we find a fusion of European, Persian and indigenous elements. A painting of Golconda School dated 1630 A.D., depicts a courtesan enveloped in orange and purple scarves **Stuart C. Welch**, 1963, Plate 13}. Here Persian influence is mainly seen in the curly courtesan's hair. The naked flesh of courtesan till waist is designed from European style. In the painting the naked flesh is the center of attraction and almost subdues the decorations around it. In another miniature of a courtesan, she wears diaphanous robes of pink and green color veil. She holds a little bird in her left hand and wears necklaces made of pearls (Zebrowski, 1983, 201 ). Her dress decorated with roses, is an oriental symbol of beauty. She has a very sensuous form and the overall impression is of sensuality. The naked flesh peeps out of the robe and the only covering appears to be the many chains of small pearls and corals which do not hide any of the flesh but accentuate it. The specialty of the Golconda paintings, is that apart from Indian themes, few European themes portraying women, too formed the corpus of miniature art. In consequence to the diverse trading contacts that the Deccan had with Europe, we can find some miniatures, which were either drawn by the European artists at Deccani courts or by the indigenous artists, who happily acknowledged the European influence and painted several themes based on European models.

A painting based on European print, depicts Madonna and child (Zebrowski, 1983. 104-106). The emphasis now shifts completely when the woman is depicted as a mother. There is no sexuality enhanced with the garments. The breasts are now shown completely covered, now as a source of nutrition rather than objects of male gaze. The Madonna is of the same facial type, which heavily stippled features and wears innumerable pearl chains. The painting retains Deccan colors of black, red, white and gold. In another painting showing European theme of Holy family



of about 1630-35 AD has pictures of angels, maidens and other royal ladies (Barret Douglas, 1958. Fig 6). However, the Arabesque and other decorative elements in the picture are typical of Golconda. Females in it have doll-like faces. There is a dark background with a palette of mauve, orange and green liberally enhanced by gold.

Another miniature of European theme illustrates a picture of virgin Mary dated 1640-60 A.D., where Mary stands on a crescent moon holding the Christ (Toby Falk and Mildred Archer, 1981, 238-441). Two angels fly above bearing a crown. Though these paintings are based on European model or inspired from an European engraving, the landscape in the background, ornaments, carpet, cushions, coloring and the flowering plants confirm its Golconda origin. Thus a due cognizance should be taken of the fact that, a crisp new idiom had arisen which combined European portraiture with Deccani extravagance.

Regarding the representation of women, one can note that women in Golconda society served in different capacities as Queens who exercised power along with the Sultans, evident from the Queens depicted with the King in many pictures, as Princesses, representing romance, as maidens who formed a part of royal court, as musicians, dancers and other artists, who displayed their talents and entertained the Sultan along with the royal guests as courtesans, who were recognized in society mainly because of their utilitarian value for the sake of enjoyment and as other common women representing local history and culture. Women in these miniatures appear complementary to the events in historical context rather than as portrayals of any probable likeness. These female pictures are painted by different artists and include women of different status. The difference is clearly marked by head gears, costumes, ornamentations and place. The pictorial representation of ragas in miniature paintings became essential for formulating the imaginative impulse which is responsible for transforming abstract notes of music to concrete images. This pictorial illustration of the Ragmala was necessary for visualizing the aesthetic or emotive essence of music for the attainment of perfect peace and enlightenment. The association of Deccani miniature paintings with music indeed made the episodes relating to women more visualized, lyrical and romantic. It is also evident from the pictures depicting ladies reading letters, books or composing poetry, those women, those of elite in particular were educated and intelligent.



Generally speaking, it is not a gainsaying to point out that womanly form in art itself remained as source of interest and this naturally resulted in the execution of a number of miniatures depicting common and local beauties apart from illustrating the habits and activities of the palace women revealing Indian delight in feminine conduct. The portraits of women attract the looks of a person mainly through their sensuality and exquisite glamour. Though there is no evidence to prove that the artists were allowed to enter the *Zenana* to portray its members and also to train women in painting, the main objective centered around narrowing the gulf between the portrayal and exact feature of the women who were perceived at royal courts and establishments. However, one has to accept the existence of certain portraits which are more ideal than real. These paintings were also based on imitation of reality with an extended dose of idealism.

But one should be careful precisely when ascribing the tendencies and emotions that are manifested in these miniatures as they could have been the patron's personal inclinations towards that particular way of depicting women that made the artists to represent the women in that way rather than the actual feeling or situation of women. The royal desires shape the artist's hands wielding the brush. However, this alone cannot disqualify the miniatures as a potential source of historical interpretation since every source is embedded within its own historical frame and a certain way of representing reality. Thus the artist wielding the brush also draws from his own traditional *oeuvre* in the very act of representing female forms- big breasts, narrow waists, wide hips as the ultimate embodiment of feminine charms. These paintings depicts the different domains which a woman normally occupies- at home, the bed, in front of a mirror, the mother involved with the child or the freedom of the yogini and the courtesan (Pande, Rekha and Lavanya, 2004, 84). The artist is also very clear about the woman's restricted space in a court before the public gaze. So, if one is careful enough these miniatures unfold before us a world of women's works and activities and give a scintillating picture of life of women in various realms and thus serve as gold mines in reconstructing and representing women's history

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### (B) Description of Module

| Items                           | Description of Module  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Subject Name                    | <b>Women's Studies</b>   |
| Paper Name                      | <b>Women and History</b>   |
| Module Name/ Title, description | <b>Women and the Sufi Movement</b>   |
| Module ID                       | Paper-3, , Module -11  |
| Pre-requisites                  | The reader is expected to have some idea about Sufi philosophy                       |
| Objectives                      | To acquaint the reader of the characteristics of Sufism and the place of women in it |
| Keywords                        | <i>Ulama, Siasilas Tassawuf.</i>   |

### Sufi Women

The religion of Islam came forth as a major force in the medieval ages. It originated in Arabia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In its initial phase the new religion turned out to be revolutionary in many ways. Its ideas of universal brotherhood, disregard for ethnic and racial differences, complete belief in a single God coupled with rights for Women contributed towards its popularity. Within hundred years after Mohammad the propagator and Prophet of Islam left the temporal world, the religion had spread to major parts of the known world including whole of Arabia, Africa, Asia and Europe. The geographical expansion of Islam was largely undertaken through military enterprises and violent means. The expansion of Islam was accompanied by certain developments which gave rise to hierarchies in its

socio-political structure. After Muhammad died an office of Caliph came into existence. The responsibility of the Caliph was to act as the head and guide of the Muslim community in spiritual as well as temporal matters. Initially this office was occupied through election but the rise of Ummayyad dynasty in 8<sup>th</sup> century saw kingship and hereditary succession to the office of caliphate emerging. It continued with the Abbasids. By the 9<sup>th</sup> century there emerged a group within Islamic community known as *Ulama*. It consisted of scholars and experts of Quran and the Hadis. The ruling aristocracy along with *Ulama* emerged as the elite in Islamic community. Under these circumstances the religion became rigid and beneficial only for the aristocracy. The noble principles of brotherhood and equality were no more practiced by the elite. The new geographical areas which were Islamized did not receive the benefit of social and political equality. In many cases the new rulers discouraged conversion to Islam as that would have meant loss of revenue obtained through taxing the *Zimmis*. In was under these circumstances that we find the emergence of a new set of ideas and practices which later came to be designated as *Sufism*. It is more correctly known as *Tassawuf*. Within this tradition men and women from different regions began practicing the nobler ideas propagated by Muhammad without any consideration for power and authority. They began to spread the message of peace, love and brotherhood among the masses of Non-Muslims across the world. They started interpreting Islam in a more humanitarian way than the *Ulama*. The *Ulama* was concerned with the literal meaning of the Quranic verses whereas the *Sufis* always sought to understand the hidden or internal meaning of words in Quran and actions of the prophet.

The present-day Iraq and surrounding areas are considered as the home of *Sufism*. The early *Sufis* lived in these areas. Gradually, the disciples of accomplished *Sufi* masters migrated to different parts of the world and settled down there. They started spreading the message of Islam and the principles of their masters. In the course of time several orders or *Siasilas* came into existence. All those following the spiritual practices and principles of a certain *Sufi* master came to constitute a particular *Silsila*. These *Silsilas* had particular characteristics. Thus we see many *Silsilas* like Suhrawardi, Chishti, Qadari, etc emerging. *Sufi* masters began propagating their ideas of spirituality to local people in their areas. Several of them became popular. Thus they earned students or disciples. The master was known as Pir or Murshid and the disciple as Murid. Some disciples were then given the

khilafat or mantle and ordered to further migrate and propagate Islam and *Sufi* ideas into unknown areas. *Sufis* accepted both male and female disciples but women had many limitations. Because of social conditions and the mindset of the *Sufis* themselves the women cannot go beyond a certain point in their spiritual endeavours.

The Quran stresses the equality of women and men. It says that though men and women are not identical they are equal before God. They are created for the mutual benefit of each other. Within Orthodox interpretation of Islam such assertions of equality was disregarded whereas in *Sufism* women were accommodated in different ways. *Sufi* ideal of *love* being the only quality through which God could be understood led them to further elaborate this ideal and thus women as well as Non-Muslims came to be accepted within their spectrum of spiritual activity. According to some *Sufi* masters this divine love could be achieved only if one loved a woman. Thus women came to play an important part in *Sufi* understanding of spirituality.

### **Women and Prophet Muhammad**

Women fulfilled many roles in *Sufism*. *Karamat* or miracles were an important aspect of *Sufism*. They believed that miracles could be performed only by pious individuals. Many women who could perform miracles were thus revered. Mothers, wives and daughters of *Sufi* masters were sought for guidance by even accomplished masters. The *Sufis* trace the beginning of their spiritual activities from Prophet Muhammad. He is believed to be the first *Sufi* who guided the believers through his exemplary lifestyle of poverty and generosity. After him it was his daughter Fatima and son-in-Law Ali who showed light to the *Sufi* community across Islamic world. In fact, Fatima is understood as the embodiment of divine love and it was to her that God revealed the complete meaning of Islam [1, Helminski]. Thus veneration to her became central to *Sufism*. Other members of Prophet's family too became reverential figures like Khadija, Prophet's first wife who supported the Prophet in the initial years of his Prophet hood when he faced stiff opposition and danger to his life; Ayesha, his last wife who is accepted as an outstanding scholar of Islam and of Prophet's life; It was through Ayesha that personal facts of Prophet's life became known to public at large. Zainab was another of Prophet's influential wives. These women are referred to as wise



merchants, patrons of religion, scholar and intellectuals. These first generation women of Islam became important figures in Islamic history.

Evolution of Islam was a complex process. In the initial stage women were equal participants but as the contours of Islam took shape women were sidelined. This development can be gleaned from the tradition of recording the *Hadiths*. *Hadith* or *Hadis* are a genre of Islamic literature related to Prophet Muhammad's practices and ideas. After the Prophet's death a tradition of recording the incidents of Prophet's life emerged. Such records were meant to guide the Muslim community in both religious and judicial matters. Several such records came into existence from time to time. These records were collected by conducting interviews with the companions of the Prophet. Reliability of information provided by a person was decided on the basis of closeness of that person with the prophet. In initial years gender of the narrator was disregarded. However, in later period i.e., 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards we see a linear decline in the number of female narrators. Similar trend is visible in the *Sufi* hagiographies as well. The earliest extant dictionary of *Sufis* was compiled by Al Sulami (d 1021). He had devoted an entire section to women *Sufis* but the section is now lost. Abu Nuaym al Isfahani's *Hilyat-al-awliya* (11<sup>th</sup> century) contains 28 biographies belonging to women but only of the Prophet's generation. Al Qushayri (11<sup>th</sup> century) on the other hand doesn't include women in his treatise and nor does Al Hujwiri (11<sup>th</sup> Century). The only exception seems to have been Abd al Rahman who relates biographies of 240 women *Sufis*, about 1/4<sup>th</sup> of total collections [98, Roded] .

### **Mothers, Wives and Daughters of *Sufis***

As already mentioned *Karamat* is an important aspect of *Sufi* spirituality. It is believed that only pious people can perform *Karamat*. It is here that the mothers, daughters and wives of *Sufis* came to occupy an important position in *Sufi* spirituality. Many *Sufi* saints had mothers who could perform miracles and guide their sons on spiritual path. Nizam-ud-din awliya visited his mother Bibi Zulekha's tomb whenever he was in spiritual dilemma for guidance. [402, Rizvi] Similarly, Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-shakar treated his mother as his teacher. He also wanted to declare his widowed daughter as his spiritual successor but could not do so as



women were not accepted as *Khalifa*. Baba Farid's mother too is believed to have performed many miracles. The wives of Sufi masters also played a similar role. Significant is the wife of *Sufi* master Al Hakim who lived in 9<sup>th</sup> century. She received instructions for her husband and herself in her dreams from *Khidr*, the revered mystical guide in Islam. Once the *Khidr* appeared in her dream and told her husband to be mindful of the cleanliness of the house. He later clarifies that by cleanliness he meant clean speech from which her husband was wavering [2, Helminski].

### **Female representation in *Sufi* thought**

*Sufism* has a different approach to the issue of gender from conventional Islam. According to Camille Helminski *God is without gender and our sustainer is beyond anything by which we seek to define him or her*. Annemarie Schimmel affirms the same. According to her *there is one area in Islam in which till and equal rights is in the realm of mysticism*. *Sufi* fascination with female power is visible in other conceptions as well. *Sufism* is full of symbolism. It does not accept literal meaning of actions and words; *Sufis* rather seek the inner meaning of the same. Consequently, symbolism forms an important part of their spiritual exercise. Thus, the yearning soul seeking to know the eternal truth is symbolized as a woman. The *Sufis* see themselves as the new bride who is full of hope and happiness on the prospect of meeting her groom. Some others perceive God as a female. Ibn Arabi who laid the theological foundation of *Sufism* worshipped the feminine side of the divine. Rumi's perception of feminine is expressed in this line *Woman is a ray of God. She is not just the earthly beloved: she is creative, not created*. Infact, in the Mevlevi order founded by Jalal-ud-din Rumi women were highly respected. Here women participated in the *sama* gatherings along with the men. Post Rumi we see the members of this order performing separate *samas* for men and women [13, Helminski].

Despite the significance attached to the feminine power of God the basic mentality of *Sufis* seems to have been patriarchal. We see spiritually accomplished women being referred to as men. Regarding Rabiya it is said that *God does not regard your outward form and When a woman becomes a man in the path of God, she is a man and one cannot any more call her a woman*. Again regarding Fatima of

Nishapur Abu yazid once said *Whoever wish to see a true man disguised as a woman, let him see Fatima* [101, Roded]

### **Popular Women Sufis**

Several women scholars could achieve spiritually high status. Great *Sufi* masters not only acknowledged their spiritual accomplishments but also accepted them as teachers and guides. Rabiya al Adawiyya is one such figure. She is considered as an important figure in early *Sufism* and universally accepted as a guiding spirit. Rabiya was a slave who lived in Basra in Iraq. She worked hard all day long for her master and fasted for God and prayed all night. It was she who first gave the idea of Love as a medium of reaching God. After she was freed by the man who owned her she lived in the wilderness of forest. She was once spotted running with a bucket of water in one hand and a torch in other hand. When asked about it she answered that she wanted to extinguish the fires of hell with water and burn the paradise with the fire of the torch as God should not be worshipped either for the rewards of paradise or from the fear of hell [1, Helminski]. According to her God should be worshipped only for Love. This philosophy of love became the guiding spirit for generations of truth seekers across the world. Thus, Rabiya became the guiding force for all *Sufis*.

After Rabiya it was Fatima of Nishapur who was acknowledged as a spiritually accomplished *Sufi* woman. She lived in Mecca and believed to have died in 830.C.E. Bayazid Bestami, a noted *Sufi* master of his time (9<sup>th</sup> ó 10<sup>th</sup> century), sings praises of her. Regarding her he says that there was no station on the path of *tasawwuf* which I told her to have experienced which she had not already done so. Another accomplished *Sufi* master Dhøñ nun Mesri once proclaimed Fatima Nishapuri as the highest among the *Sufis* and who had profound knowledge of the inner meanings of the Quran. He further says of her as she is of the saints of the God, she is my teacher [2, Helminski]. Many people had spiritual discussions with her. One finds mention of Abu Yazid who frequently conversed with her without the impediment of veil unless one day when he remarked regarding a henna stain on her hand. Since then Fatima refused to talk to him as he went astray from spirituality by commenting on material things [427, Schimmel]. Similarly, Fatima of Cordova is also an important figure in *Sufism*. Ibn Arabi who is accepted as the *Sufi* who laid the theological foundation of *Sufism* accepted her as his teacher and

Shaikha. She lived in utter poverty and celebrated poverty as a mercy of God. Many miracles are attributed to her [2, Helminski].

### **Sufi Women and Literary Works**

Information regarding the *Sufis* is available through a category of Islamic literature known as Malfuzat. It generally contains biographical accounts, anecdotes, incidents and teachings of famous *Sufi* saints. Women contribution to this genre of literature is important. A'isha of Damascus (15<sup>th</sup> century) wrote a commentary on Khwaja Abdøllah Ansari's work called Manazil-as-sa'erin (stations on the way). Her work was entitled "Veiled hints within the stations of the saints". Bibi Hayati of the Nimutallahi order composed a *divan* related to the integration of inner and outer world in *Sufi* thought [3, Helminski]. In India important contribution has been made by Princess Jahan Ara, daughter of Mughal Emperor Shahjahan. She was deeply religious in her conduct. She was introduced to Qadri order by her brother Dara Shikoh. Mullah Shah of Kashmir was her *Shaikh* under whose guidance she wrote several *Risalas* or pamphlets on mysticism and spirituality. Famous amongst these is the *Risala-i-sahibiyya* in which she narrates her own spiritual visions and experiences and *Munis-ul-Arwah*, a biography of Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti and his descendants [43, Mukherjee]. The tradition of women writers has continued in many cultures. Recently, in Turkey a *divan* of women writers of the Bektashi order was released.

### **Limitations for Women in Sufism**

Despite the prominent presence of women and the *Sufi* masters' acknowledgement of women as spiritually accomplished beings, women *Sufis* had to face many limitations in pursuance of their spiritual ambitions. Though in the early period women did succeed men as spiritual guides or as *Shaikhas*, we do not find them in such positions for the larger part of the historical period. For instance a famous *Sufi* saint of India Farid-ud-din Ganj Shakar lamented the fact that his daughter could not be given the *khilafat* (headship of an order) as the society does not accept a woman in that position [60-61, Zaidi]. In fact, women were not even regular members of the *Khanqah* though women were accepted as disciples by *Sufi* masters. Other than the famous and enlightened female *Sufis*, the presence of other women was not even acknowledged. In hagiographic works too women

contributors are referred to as *‘a devout woman* [93, Roded]. No personal reference to such a personality is provided which makes it difficult to accept them as historical figures.

Women are seen in different roles in Sufi establishments; as spiritual guides and enlightened beings; as mothers, daughters, wives of shaikhs providing them support and guidance when required; As preservers of sufi knowledge and as composers of biographies; as composers and preservers of songs and narrations; and as caretakers of tombs of famous shaikhs [xx, Abbas]. The principles given by Sufis has been preserved largely by women through an ingenious way i.e., through folk songs. Several women across cultures have practiced spirituality by singing songs containing the teachings of local Sufis who inspired them to lead cleaner and religious lives. It is referred to as *Sufiana kalam*. Similar songs were sung by men in the form of *Qawwali* [4, Abbas]. In Deccan region of India we find women practicing in similar ways. Songs sung by them was known as chakki nama, charkhi nama, Luri nama and Shadi nama. While Chakki means Grinding Charkhi means spinning. Similarly, Luri is lullabies and Shadi refers to marriages [119, Eaton]. As is evident from the names all these songs were related to domestic activities generally involving women. Women sung the above songs while grinding, spinning and rocking their children to sleep. Through such daily activities they conveyed the teaching of the Sufis and practiced it a well. This was how the common women benefitted from associating with Sufis.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion it can be said that Islam though friendly to women in many aspects could not escape the clutches of patriarchy in its evolution. Subsequently, it became lopsided favouring its male members against the women folk. Simultaneously, the community itself went through a process which saw the emergence of a hierarchy whereby an elite group usurped political power. Under these circumstances we see the emergence of a movement across the Islamic world in the form of Sufism. It developed into an alternative spiritual path. It is in this sphere that women could find refuge. Women were seen fulfilling several roles. As mothers, wives and daughters they supported their sons and husbands who were on the path of Sufism. As spiritual guides they pursued their spiritual endeavours. They contributed towards preserving Sufi histories and teachings by recording it.



Lastly, the common women also emulated the Sufi way of life by practicing it in their day-to-day life. Thus we can say that though accomplished women like Rabiya and Fatima made significant contribution to Sufism; the common women across the Islamic world have been the preservers of knowledge and principles of Sufism.





## Paper- 3 Module- 3

### Women in the rig vedic period

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|----------|--|

## Women in the rig vedic period

### Introduction

The status of women in any society is a matter of great interest to scholars. This is because the status of women is seen as an indicator of a society's progress in social, economic and political terms. A high status of women doesn't necessarily mean that the society was egalitarian. But often, in patriarchal societies also, women may enjoy varying degrees of progress and freedom, while the actual control of the governance is in the hands of men. A truly women-controlled society has never been known in human history; not even in the matrilineal social systems.

The status of women in the *Rig Veda* became a very important subject of discussion in the Colonial period. This is because initially the Europeans had a condescending view of the Indian civilisation and held the opinion that this was a degenerate civilisation that needed uplifting under guidance of their superior European perspective. However, further study by later scholars showed that Indian civilisation was one of the oldest in the world and it was certainly the oldest civilisation that had remained continuously alive and had made many significant contributions to the progress of Humanity in ancient times. Sanskrit was one of the most ancient languages and was closely linked to the ancient European languages such as Latin and German and belonged to the same stock as these ancient European languages. These findings led to the notion of a great ancient Indian civilisation that had got degraded through

subsequent centuries, to the extent that now in the Colonial period, Indians had forgotten their ancient greatness and were leading a wretched existence. Since the *Rig Veda* was the most ancient Sanskrit text of India (its earliest layers datable to c. 1500 BCE or even a little older), the status of women as reflected in the Rig Vedic period became a very important tool to establish the intellectual superiority of the Indian civilisation. It was ascertained that the status of women reflected a fair degree of egalitarianism and was even better than the position of women in ancient Greece and Rome. In the following passages we discuss how various perspectives on the women in the Rig Vedic period have evolved and what we glean from the Rig Vedic texts about women and also some directions for future research in this area of inquiry.

## **1.1 PERSPECTIVES AND CRITIQUES**

In this section we will explore the main perspectives and also offer some critical perspectives on them. It is to be noted that critical perspectives are not always negative, but may also be positive and constructive. The purpose behind these critical perspectives is to provide a balanced view of the issue being studied.

### **1.1.1 Women in the Rig Vedic Period – Various Viewpoints**

The earliest European scholars of the *Rig Veda* brought out the important discovery that the women enjoyed a very high position which was almost equal to that of the men in the Rig Vedic period (C. Bader, Routledge 1925 1<sup>st</sup> Ed, 2013, pp. 1 – 74; Upinder Singh, Pearson, 2009, pp. 2-11). This was regarded as important because it helped to establish the image of the most ancient layer of the Indian civilisation as an intellectually superior one, which even surpassed ancient Greece and Rome. This generated a lot of interest in the *Vedas* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and efforts began to be made by both European and Indian scholars to study the Vedas, translate them in English and other European languages and to maintain copies of these texts in various libraries and archives in India and Europe. This trend continued long into the 20<sup>th</sup>

century and has never really stopped. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century today, efforts are being made to highlight the high position of women in the Rig Vedic society. However, in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially Indian scholars also began to study the *Rig Veda* from a different viewpoint and began to highlight the different classes that existed in the Rig Vedic period and the different status of women that may have existed in these different strata of society, the highest position being enjoyed by the women of the highest stratum and the degree of exaltation decreasing as one went down the social order. They pointed out that the majority of women belonged to the middle and lower classes of the society and hence may not have enjoyed the high status enjoyed by a few high-class women that the earlier scholars had glorified as a marker for the entire Rig Vedic society (Kumkum Roy, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 9-19). Some other scholars also made a distinction between the Rig Vedic period and the later Vedic period characterised by the other three *Vedas* and related texts such as the *Upanishads*, *Brahmanas* and the *Aranyakas*. They propounded the notion that the Rig Vedic society was egalitarian, but with the increasing complexity in the society as reflected in the other three Vedic texts, the status of the majority of women began to decline. In the following passages we will learn some of the critical perspectives on these viewpoints propounded by scholars on the Rig Vedic women.

### **1.1.2 Women in the Rig Vedic Period – Critical Perspectives**

It is essential to understand that the notion of “status of women” is a product of the modern system of education and the pre-modern texts of the world talk about the lives of women, notions about women’s responsibilities of women and how men view them etc., but they don’t talk about the “status of women” in clear-cut terms as the modern scholarly discourse understands it. It is left to the scholar to interpret from the existing material what kind of status the women had in a particular society and a subjective interpretation is inevitable in such a situation. The *Rig Veda* is no exception to this. This text is essentially a

collection of hymns to the various deities worshipped by the people who followed this text, in addition to the accounts of deities, kings and other figures, some imagined and some real in that society. The entire notion of the status of women in the Rig Vedic period is based on these verses and hence, differences of opinions about what these verses reveal about the women are bound to happen.

Thus, there are references to female deities, hymns to whom have been visualised by the sages, some of whom are women. There are also references to highly learned women in the text. All this has been interpreted by the scholars as evidence of a high status of women. On the other hand, there are scholars who argue that there are references to dowry, and that obviously not every woman was as free to get educated as these highly-placed women. The commonplace women are not mentioned in the text. Hence, they contest the view of a high status of women in an egalitarian Rig Vedic society. The distinction between the Rig Vedic society and the society of the other 3 *Vedas* is essentially based on the more complex picture of the society in the other three *Vedas*, which are regarded as a few hundred years later than the *Rig Veda* based on their complex picture. Seen from the perspective of each scholar, all these notions appear to be correct. However, there is a need to critically look at these notions. For example, a text showing a more complex society need not be later than a text showing less complex society. No society in the world has ever been monolithic and uniform in nature. In every period in every region variations in the society have existed within the same time bracket. Hence, hypothetically speaking, it's not necessary that one Veda shows an egalitarian society which declined gradually in the period of the other Vedas which came later. It's quite possible that these texts show different degrees of complexities in the Vedic societies across a geographical expanse within the same long time bracket. This argument has not been historically researched and is being made purely from a hypothetical standpoint. The only purpose here is to show that what has been presumed to be evidence of chronologically vertical, linear progression may be the evidence of a horizontal, spatial



differentiation. If we accept the notion that there are always differentiations across a geographical expanse even within the same time bracket, which is almost always true, then it is possible to argue that it's not necessary to accept that the entire society of the *Rig Veda* was a homogenous one, with no differences within the Rig Vedic evidences itself. Thus it's not plausible to argue that all Rig Vedic people followed the same system. It's more likely that different smaller communities within the society reflected in the *Rig Veda* might have followed different systems. Hence, there may have been some communities in which women enjoyed a high status, while in others they didn't enjoy such a high status. Further, even within each community the situation may have differed from family to family. We are talking about a system of very large joint family groups, so this is in fact more plausible than accepting the notion that all families across the Rig Vedic society followed a uniform system. Hence, we cannot speak in terms of a uniform Rig Vedic society. We have to allow for variations within the same time bracket and within the same geographical expanse. The following sections discuss the picture of women that emerges from a reading of the *Rig Veda* and its associated texts and all of this is not a uniform picture.

## **1.2 VARIOUS ASPECTS RELATED TO WOMEN IN THE RIG VEDIC PERIOD**

### **1.2.1 The Goddess as the Supreme Deity**

The Rig Veda shows a complex religious system that conceptualises a supreme divinity called Brahman. *The Nasadiya Suktam* in the 10.129 of the *Rig Veda* (Ralph Griffith (Tr.), Kotagiri 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 1896 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 1889, p. 490) talks about the creation of the Universe by this formless Brahman. This supreme deity is formless and is neither man nor woman. However, it can assume innumerable forms according to different situations. It assumes the form of the Goddess to create the Universe. The Goddess is said to be omnipotent and omniscient. The entire Creation emanates from her and disappears into her. She assumes

innumerable forms to suit different situations. She imparts energy to the gods and goddesses who are her manifestations. The hymn known as the *Devi Suktam* or *Vagambhriniya Suktam*, composed by the woman sage Vak the daughter of sage Ambhrina in the 10.125 of the *Rig Veda* (Ralph Griffith (Tr.), Kotagiri 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 1896 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 1889, p. 490), visualises this Cosmic form of the Goddess who is Brahman itself. Apart from this, the *Rig Veda* conceptualises of *Prakriti* and *Purusha*. Out of these two, *Prakriti* the feminine principle is the dynamic, creative principle and *Purusha* the masculine principle is the passive principle and it becomes activated only when it comes in contact with the feminine *Prakriti*.

The above references show that the *Rig Veda* conceptualised the supreme deity as formless, but the feminine form took primacy over the masculine form in the process of Creation, sustenance and disappearance of the Universe. This suggests a prominent position given to the feminine power in the *Rig Veda*. However, at the same time, there is the *Savitri Manta* in 3.62.10 of the *Rig Veda* (Ralph Griffith (Tr.), Kotagiri 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 1896 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 1889, p. 153), or what has come to be popularly referred to as the *Gayatri Manta*, which conceptualises the supreme Brahman as god Savitra who is also formless. Then there is the *Purusha Suktam* 10.90 of the *Rig Veda* (Ralph Griffith (Tr.), Kotagiri 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 1896 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 1889, p. 469), which conceptualises *Purusha* in the masculine form, who is sacrificed to create the Universe. These references have been interpreted as the identification of the Goddess with *Brahman* as the oldest layer and the masculine layers evolving later within the period of the *Rig Veda*. However, if we attempt an alternative interpretation, it is plausible that the Goddess was identified with the *Brahman* and had the capability to assume a masculine form in certain situations. The two versions then need not have come one after the other in time, but may have existed simultaneously. This supports the notion that even within the Rig Vedic period, there was a possibility of diverse ideas to exist across society.

Apart from these conceptualizations of the supreme deity, there is a multitude of gods and goddesses for whom hymns have been conceptualised. Amongst the many goddesses mentioned are Usha the Dawn, Aditi the mother of gods and Nirriti the Dark Goddess who is beyond the Cosmic Cycle. Because of her name, she has been interpreted as the fearful goddess associated with lawlessness. However, there are alternative interpretations possible of her name. She may have been a form of the Supreme Goddess identified with *Brahman*, who became associated with the divine principle that was beyond the structured systems of the Universe, interpreted as “lawlessness” in modern scholarship. The Supreme Goddess is of course, beyond the bounds of the Cosmic Cycle, which she controls. Hence, she may be referred to as Nirriti in etymological terms. At the same time, the dark forces of Nature can also be perceived as manifestations of the Goddess in the form of Nirriti. It is to be remembered that conceptually speaking, all these gods and goddesses were just manifestations of the Goddess who was identified with *Brahman*, although they were worshipped separately. They were supposed to derive their energy and power from the Supreme Goddess, without whose energy they were inert and powerless. This conceptualisation of the Universe is the reverse of the conceptualisation of the Universe in some other major religions, where God the creator is formless, but is imagined as closer to the likeness of man rather than woman. Thus, this is a multi-layered system where numerous gods and goddesses have arisen from a single formless divinity who primarily assumes the form of the Goddess to create and run the Universe. There is Indra, the king of gods and goddesses, but Indra is not above this Supreme *Brahman* and the Great Goddesses. Indeed, without the energy and power given by the Great Goddess, Indra is incapable of doing anything. He has to engage in penance to conquer his rivals many times. It is also important to remember that if we accept this interpretation of the Rig Vedic religion, then the interpretations that gave ritual and social authorities to masculine rather than feminine power in Hinduism have to be regarded

as later in evolution. It appears that at some stage the priestly class that worked in tandem with the ruling class, attempted to reverse this gender equation in ritual and social structure and began to assign a subordinate status to the feminine principle and therefore, to the women. However, this development was post Vedic in history.

(*Devi Suktam* from the *Rig Veda*, visualised by the woman sage Vak the daughter of Sage Ambhrina - <https://youtu.be/F8jcgxH6qt8>- **Please take all copyright permission before using**).

(*Usha Suktam* from the *Rig Veda* – <https://youtu.be/ohX7Ix8VIDU>- **please take all copyright permission before using**).

### 1.2.2 Women's Education, Marriage and Rights

There are verses in the *Rig Veda* which talk about the necessity of a woman to get well educated before she gets married. Husband requests his wife to give the discourse of knowledge to her in-laws' family. It is advised that a well-educated girl should be married to a suitable groom of equal knowledge and social standing. There are no verses suggesting child marriage. *Sati* or the practice of widow burning is nowhere referred to. There are references to *Svayamvara* in which the girl chooses her own husband amongst many suitors. A practice of *Samana* is referred to where girls went to attend fairs and festivals and chose their own suitors. *Gandharva Vivaha* or marriage by couples who chose each other by falling in love was a legitimate practice. There are many women sages who visualized verses of the *Rig Veda* and were called *Brahmavadinis*. Apala, Ghosa etc. were famous scholars who visualized Vedic verses. Gargi and Maitreyi were famous Vedic scholars who engaged in debates and defeated men in these debates. Women could get married at a late age and even could choose not to get married. *Pardah* system is nowhere referred to. Women are said to participate in the law giving process. The wife is said to share equally the rights of her household along with her husband. She is the mistress of her household. They are said to be equal partners in marriage. Women could perform sacrifices and had the right



to go through the same *sanskaras* as the men, including the thread ceremony. Without the accompaniment of women, a sacrifice was not regarded as complete. Women also contributed towards agriculture, looking after the cattle and gave decisions regarding financial matters to the men in their families.

These references have been regarded as evidence that the Rig Vedic society was almost an egalitarian one, where women shared equal rights with the men and enjoyed a lot of freedom. However, there are also other kinds of references. For example, it was customary for the bride's father to give wealth as gift to the groom at the time of the wedding. However, this was not a demand from the groom and entirely depended upon the wishes of the father of the bride. At the same time, *Brahma* marriage was the best form of marriage, in which no dowry was given and the father simply gave away his daughter by pouring water on the palms of the groom. *Arsha* marriage was also recommended, where the groom paid dowry to the bride because he was lesser in education and social status than the bride. Hence, dowry was not recommended but was practiced at the will of the father of the bride. More than this, a wife decided about the financial matters of her husband, but she didn't own her separate property. This was because marriage was regarded as insoluble and the wife was regarded as inseparable part of her husband's life. However, this was not a situation where the wife owned and dispensed with the property and the husband didn't have any rights in these matters. Rather, the husband dispensed with the property by following the advice of his wife. This obviously gave the husband a leverage above his wife, although the Rig Vedic vision was that the husband should not try to disregard his wife in financial and property matters. Because divorce was not recommended, a wife had to live with an ill-treating husband, if he chose to be so. This was against the Rig Vedic vision, which expected the husband to treat his wife with respect and dignity (Upinder Singh, Pearson, 2009, pp. 182-255).



More recently, it has also been ascertained that certain references in the *Rig Vedam* may arguably contain residues of homoeroticism, which may have been practiced by some people in the Rig Vedic society. According to this research, homoeroticism has very ancient roots in India going back to the Rig Vedic times and is not really an import from the decadent West (Nancy Bonvillain, Prentice Hall, 2001, p. 281).

Seeing the above, it again appears that even though the Rig Vedic vision gave a high status and a lot of freedom and respect to the women, in practice, there may have been a diversity within the Rig Vedic society. One should also keep in mind that these are interpretations gleaned by scholars from the verses which are essentially meant for religious rituals. The exact situation is not known to us. However, a latitude of diversity in social practices may not be completely impossible in this regard. But overall, the way the *Rig Veda* visualizes the status of women, it appears to be quite egalitarian and respectful and gave them a lot of freedom.

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